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Understanding Higher Education in Further Education Colleges

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

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Executive summary

This summary presents the main findings from research undertaken for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to understand the current nature of higher education (HE) in further education colleges (FECs) in England. The study was carried out between March 2011 and March 2012 by a team from the University of Sheffield and the Institute of Education, University of London.

The research involved a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches, including: a review of the relevant literature; an analysis of administrative data on provision and participation; fieldwork in case-study FECs; interviews with managers in colleges and their partner higher education institutions (HEIs); a questionnaire survey of students coupled with in-class discussion groups; and interviews with employers.

An overview of the design and conduct of the study is given in Chapter 1, including its aims, sources, methods and timetable. Methods of data collection and analysis are also described in relevant chapters and appendices.

Features of development: the findings of the literature review

- **FECs are long-standing providers of HE**. Some trace their higher-level work back to the 1950s and 1960s. Others came into HE as a result of the rapid expansion during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Part of this growth was by way of franchising: the sub-contracting (indirect funding) of the teaching of courses to colleges by partner HEIs. Expansion took place in colleges despite legislation in 1988 and 1992 to concentrate growth on institutions in the HE sector. This policy was reversed following the report of the Dearing inquiry into HE.

- **Policies since 1997 have sought a larger role for colleges in undergraduate education**. The Dearing report recommended that colleges be accorded a special mission in HE below the Bachelors' level based on direct funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and focused on qualifications like the Higher National Diploma (HND) and Higher National Certificate (HNC). An enhanced role for FECs was accepted by the Blair Government. However, indirect funding was subsequently favoured over direct funding and a new work-focused Foundation Degree (FD) was intended to replace Higher National (HN) qualifications.

- **Lead responsibility for policy and development is vested with HEFCE**. By virtue of its power to fund courses of prescribed higher education (postgraduate and undergraduate education) in colleges, HEFCE is responsible for guiding and developing higher education in the further education (FE) sector. At the same time, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) is able to fund non-prescribed courses (higher level professional and vocational qualifications) in FECs. This has not been a policy priority for the SFA and its predecessors. As a consequence, the number of students on non-prescribed programmes has declined.

- **Funding, quality and reporting arrangements for HE in colleges are divided and complex**. HE in colleges is funded in three main ways: direct by HEFCE; indirect by HEFCE (through franchising); and by the SFA and other non-HEFCE sources. Its courses come under two quality assurance bodies: the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) for direct and indirectly funded undergraduate education; and by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) for higher level qualifications funded by the SFA. Data on HE students registered at HEIs and taught in FECs is collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Data on HE students registered at colleges is collected by the Data Agency. The methodologies for funding, quality and data collection are not aligned.

- **There is little evidence of overall growth in college-taught HE**. Some individual colleges have seen a growth in undergraduate numbers but expansion in the post-Dearing years has proved difficult to achieve. One explanation has to do with the specificity of the local and regional markets for students and for courses sought by employers. A second has to do with low visibility and status of higher education in FECs. A third explanation is in terms of the two-sector structure and organisation of the system which was designed to keep HE and FE in separate sectors. Lastly, there is the argument (advanced by HEFCE) that some colleges have been insufficiently strategic in their planning and management of higher education.

- **Confidence in the quality and standards of their HE is reported for nearly all colleges**. Between 2002 and 2007, the QAA conducted 310 reviews in 232 FECs across 20 different subjects. The reviewers had confidence in the standards of around 94 per cent of the provision. Between 2008 and 2010, 165 summative reviews were completed. Judgements of confidence in standards of provision were made in all but three cases. Assessments of the quality of learning opportunities resulted in confidence judgements in all but two instances. These results were comparable to the outcomes of institutional audits in HEIs over the same period.

- **A lower overall level of student satisfaction with undergraduate education in colleges is reported**. The National Student Survey (NSS) in 2008. 2009 and 2010 reported lower overall satisfaction with the quality of courses among students taught in FECs than for those in HEIs. There were differences as well in the responses to questions on assessment and feedback (where college students were more satisfied) and for learning resources and for organisation and management (where college students were less satisfied).

- **Teaching and learning is acknowledged to be distinctive in college settings**. Unlike their counterparts in HEIs, HE students were a minority of the student population in FECs where teaching was mostly at the further education levels. In colleges with sizeable amounts of HE, there were separate spaces for students, including dedicated campuses and buildings. Elsewhere, there was more sharing of facilities. HE students in colleges were frequently taught in smaller classes than in HEIs and they enjoyed regular access to teaching staff. Their lecturers also taught more hours than colleagues in HEIs. Contracts for staff in FECs did not require them to undertake research, although they were increasingly expected to undertake scholarly activity.

These and other aspects of contemporary policy, practice and development are outlined in Chapter 2.

Patterns of provision and participation: the evidence of administrative data

- **Around one in twelve higher education students (eight per cent of the HE population) were taught in FECs**. In 2009-10, 177,000 students were studying for undergraduate, postgraduate and other higher level qualifications in the further education sector. The majority (61%) were pursuing courses of undergraduate education. Another 36% were studying for other higher-level qualifications. The rest (three per cent) were postgraduate students.

- **Most HE students in FECs – 60% of the total – studied on a part-time basis**. However, this was not the case for the college-taught undergraduate population where just over one-half (55%) were defined as full-time students. Within the ranks of undergraduate education, those undertaking Bachelors' Degrees, Foundation Degrees and HNDs were mostly full-time students. By contrast, 93% of the 64,000 students pursuing other higher level qualifications were part-time in their mode of study.

- **HE was taught in the great majority of FECs**. Some 283 colleges offered programmes at these levels. This accounted for nearly all general FECs (224 out of 225) and a majority of specialist colleges and specialist designated institutions (25 out of 33). Only a minority of sixth form colleges (34 out of 91) offered one or more courses of HE.

- **A minority of FECs account for the majority of HE students**. Fifty-two colleges taught one-half of the higher education students in the further education sector. Each of these colleges had over 1000 higher education students, with over 4000 at the largest providers. At other end of the sector, there were 43 FECs (mostly sixth form colleges) with less than 100 higher education students.

- **Most colleges were funded in more than one way for their HE**. Close to one-half (45%) drew on two funding routes (usually indirect HEFCE + SFA/Other). More than one-third (37%) relied on three funding routes (direct HEFCE + indirect HEFCE + SFA/Other).

- **Indirect funding partnerships were a prominent feature of the HE landscape, involving 245 colleges (70% of the total) and 68 HEIs (48% of the total)**. Among the latter, two-thirds were post-1992 universities, with 16 in partnership with ten or more FECs. Twenty pre-1992 universities operated indirect arrangements, with a smaller number of college partners. On their side, most FECs were in partnership with one, two or three HEIs.

- **Colleges contributed to widening participation in important ways**. Compared to HEIs, students in colleges were older, more likely to be studying part-time and, in the case of undergraduate entrants, more likely to have come from areas of low participation in higher education. Those joining undergraduate courses also held a broader range of entry qualifications. A smaller proportion entered with A-Levels

and a larger proportion possessed Level 3 vocational qualifications or lower level qualifications. At the same time, those entering with higher education qualifications were a larger proportion in colleges than in HEIs, with many of these likely to be students who had completed a FD or HND and who then progressed directly to the final year of a Bachelor's Degree.

These patterns are described and considered in Chapter 3.

Perspectives of colleges and partner universities: the interview findings

- **The managers interviewed saw most HE in colleges as complementary to rather than competitive with provision in HEIs**. This view was held by both FEC and HEI managers. The majority of courses led to the award of Foundation Degrees, although they often included an additional element that enabled students to top-up their awards and receive Bachelors' Degrees. Typically FDs had been substituted for Higher National Diplomas/Certificates, although in some occupational sectors HNs had continued to be preferred by employers. Some standalone Bachelors' Degree programmes were offered, especially in mixed economy and specialist colleges. In addition, a wide range of non-prescribed courses was offered, especially in some professional sectors and for continuing professional development.

- **The major drivers for developing higher education courses in colleges were (i) legacy, i.e. their historic provision; (ii) employer engagement; and (iii) access**. Their students were seen as more 'local', in the sense that they would find it difficult to study in an HEI for geographical, social and other reasons, and also as more focused on vocational outcomes. However, there was a strong resistance to accepting a 'deficit' model of HE students in FECs. The strategic rationales for HEIs engaging in partnerships with FECs were similar. They are (i) legacy; (ii) regional 'footprint'; (iii) widening participation; and (iv) employer engagement.

- **The majority of colleges were anticipating growth in the number of students on HE programmes**. This was despite the fact that the number of students on these programmes had in some cases been static or slow to grow over the past decade, and the threat that some HEIs might withdraw student numbers on franchised courses as their own student numbers were reduced. However, most were expecting incremental rather than rapid growth. Also, few were anticipating significant shifts in their course portfolios.

- **In most of the case-study colleges there was no separate organisation of HE courses**. Most staff taught on both FE and HE courses. Workloads were also similar, although some colleges offered modest reductions to staff who taught predominantly on HE courses. However, typically separate arrangements were made for the management of HE courses in terms of quality assurance and liaison with HEI partners; FECs also had developed separate HE strategies, principally but not exclusively to meet the needs of HEFCE; and efforts were made to provide distinctive teaching accommodation, and especially social space, for HE students.

- **Relationships with partner HEIs were seen as generally good by colleges, a view confirmed by partner universities**. The advantages were seen as the

availability to college students of established HEI 'brands', and access by teaching staff to wider disciplinary communities. The major disadvantage was seen as the slow decision-making timescale in HEIs. However, there appeared to be a lively market in HEI partners, with FECs changing partners if HEIs were not sufficiently flexible (or if changes in their course portfolio made another HEI a more appropriate partner in terms of subject expertise). Moves to apply for degree-awarding powers typically were regarded as defensive, and aimed as much at future private-provider rivals as existing HEIs. HEIs increasingly regarded their FEC partnerships as significant elements in their overall institutional strategies – and, as such, longer-term and solid commitments.

- **The cost of providing HE courses in colleges was believed to be lower than in HEIs by college managers**. The main reasons were lower average teaching costs and greater staff productivity, combined with more limited expenditure on learning infrastructure and social facilities. Detailed cost comparisons were difficult to make. FECs did not treat HE courses as 'loss leaders', and expected them to make the same financial contribution as FE courses. In the case of validated courses FECs were free to set their fee levels, following discussion with their HEI partners.

- **The 'learning culture' of HE students in colleges was regarded as distinctive from that of students in HEIs**. They were seen as benefiting from more intensive classroom contact and placing a lower value on extra-curricular activities. HEI partners broadly shared this view, although there was more concern about the breadth of the experience offered to students in FECs. However, academic standards were not regarded as a major issue by either FEC or HEI managers. Existing validation arrangements, and the multiple levels of scrutiny to which HE courses in FECs were subject, were seen as more than adequate safeguards.

These findings are elaborated in Chapter 4.

Decisions and experiences of students: the survey findings

- **The 2,523 undergraduate students surveyed in Autumn 2011 were drawn from 25 case-study colleges**. They were studying for a Bachelor's Degree, Foundation Degree, HND, HNC, Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) and Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE).

- **The students had traditional undergraduate characteristics but came from non-traditional backgrounds**. The majority were female; aged 24 and under; white; single; childless; and their highest entry qualification was two A-Levels or equivalent. They were mainly non-traditional students whereby neither parent had a higher education qualification but most had had some exposure to higher education because another close relative held a higher education qualification. The majority were aiming for a Foundation Degree and studied full-time on a course directly funded by HEFCE.

- **Student motives for entering HE were primarily instrumental: they wanted to improve their life chances and job prospects**. These employment and career-related reasons, alongside interest in their course, were also why they selected their

course. They chose their college mostly because of the courses available and the college's proximity to their home or place of work.

- **It is questionable if the students were making an informed choice of institution**. When opting to study at a college rather than a university most had no, or very limited, experience of universities, and they were largely unaware or indifferent to what universities could offer. Nor were they particularly drawn to colleges because of the purported distinctive missions of further education colleges compared with higher education institutions, especially in terms of colleges' employer engagement activities.

- **A minority of students – 17% of those studying for a Bachelor's Degree – thought they had applied to study at a university rather than a college**. These students were not making an informed or active choice to study at a college, in fact quite the opposite – they thought they were choosing to go to a university.

- **Around two-thirds of students only applied to study at the college they were attending, and often their choices were limited and highly constrained, even when their college was their first choice**. Students who selected their college because it was near their home or place of work, or because they had progressed from another course at their college or had previously studied at the college, were far less likely to apply elsewhere to study – they were opting for a convenient and 'safe' place to study. While some were making a positive informed choice to study at their college, others were restricting their options and choices, consciously or unconsciously because of their family, material, cultural and social circumstances. It is questionable, therefore, if all these student groups were making informed choices.

- **Other students had broader horizons and 29% had applied to study at a university**. Those most likely to do so were aged 20 and under, single, white, and came from families where at least one parent had been to university. For some, their decision to study at a college rather than a university may have been a positive one as they genuinely had a choice between a college and a university. For these students, what attracted them to a college over a university was the smaller college class size but not other college features, such as the college's learning environment or employer engagement activities. For others who applied to a university but had not gone to a university, they rarely had a genuine choice because they had failed to obtain the university's entry requirements. They had no choice but to go to a college if they wanted a higher education.

- **College students most frequently identified with the label of 'university student', especially younger full-time students studying for a Bachelor's Degree, but where they had an alternative occupational identify to call upon, they opted for that instead**. Consequently, only a small minority (around 16%) identified with being called a 'college student'.

- **College students' overall educational experience was positive, just like those reported in other studies on those studying at universities**. However, their assessment of the college environment and their individual daily experiences of being a student, including the help and support they received, was more mixed, and

was not as good as those of university students. On the one hand, college students did not have access to the full range of experiences available in higher education institutions – in terms of both the full range of learning resources, and extra-curricular activities. On the other hand, college students had a more personal learning environment than most university students, as indicated by the fact that the majority of college students surveyed thought their lecturers and tutors knew their name, unlike their university peers in other studies. Yet, there appeared to be limited differences in the number of hours of face-to-face contact with teaching staff at colleges compared with those studying at universities – another espoused difference between colleges and higher education institutions. Full-time college students had an average of 16 hours a week of face-to-face contact with teaching staff while broadly similar data from other studies for full-time university students suggest they have 15 hours a week.

- **The experiences of the part-time college students were certainly not as good as those of their full-time peers, or those of part-time university students, especially in relation to personal support and feedback**. Their colleges' support structures appeared to be geared more successfully towards the needs of younger full-time students. In turn, this brings into question, the responsiveness of the case-study colleges to the realities of students' desire for flexible study and for combining study with full-time employment – a feature colleges pride themselves on as part of their broader agenda of providing flexible higher education vocational provision, and an acclaimed distinctive feature of further education provision.

The findings from the student survey are reported and discussed in Chapter 5.

Views and valuations of employers: the interview findings

- **Employers in the interview sample used colleges to recruit to their organisations and they collaborated with FECs to deliver programmes of continuing professional development (CPD) for their workforces**. A wide variety of employers and enterprises worked with colleges for these purposes: large, medium and small; private as well as public and voluntary; and organisations whose primary sphere of operation was international, national, regional or local.

- **Some collaborations built on earlier activities, including where work at the further education levels led to cooperative arrangements at the undergraduate levels**. Others were more recent ventures. The introduction of Foundation Degrees had been influential in forging new relationships between colleges, universities and employers. Qualifications of this kind were welcomed, especially the scope they afforded for employer engagement.

- **Depending on the services required and the pattern of provision in the region or locality, organisations might have partnerships with several providers**. Most employers had relationships with one, two or three colleges. It was common for organisations with multiple partnerships to be linked to colleges and to universities. Among the large employers, there were examples of collaborations with six or more institutions.

- **Whereas employers mostly used universities to recruit Bachelors' level students, they used colleges or universities for their recruitment of individuals with FDs, HNDs and HNCs**. Most employers also worked equally and severally with colleges and universities to meet their continuing education and training requirements at these levels.

- **For both recruitment and continuing professional development at levels below the Bachelor's Degree, employers did not make distinctions by the type of provider**. As businesses, this was not how they viewed or valued their involvement with these institutions. Their preferences and priorities were centred on the nature of the course, the expertise of staff and the capabilities of students. They were willing to work with any college or university that could offer programmes matched to their specific (and often specialist) needs.

- **Employers recognised that colleges and universities were diverse in their course offerings and that higher education was a plural system**. This was among the main reasons for collaboration with more than one provider. They were keen to work with providers that demonstrated commitment and flexibility. A growth in apprenticeships at the higher levels and an expansion of work-focused qualifications (like the FD) were likely to make them look more at colleges.

- **The majority of employers expected their future recruitment needs to remain broadly the same**. They intended to continue with their links with colleges and universities. Several anticipated higher standards of service in return for increased fees. Some saw the rise in fees as an opportunity to focus more of their recruitment at the lower qualification levels. This would require them to develop or expand their own training programmes – in association with colleges and universities – to equip their employees with higher level qualifications.

- **A number of small and medium size enterprises had struggled to find an appropriate vehicle (collaborative or otherwise) for addressing their training needs**. They could not offer sufficient numbers for bespoke training and they found it hard to identify existing programmes that aligned with their requirements and budgets. A key consideration for nearly all employers was proximity – or rather travel time – which was a key element in their costing and something insufficiently appreciated by colleges and universities.

- **Payment of fees (in part or full) and time off to study were among a number of ways in which employees were supported in their continuing professional development**. Other forms of support in kind included access to specialist facilities and leading-edge technologies. Employers were involved in a wide range of aspects of course design, development and delivery, including roles in teaching and assessment as well as oversight and review of programmes. The span and intensity of involvement was usually greater where a premium was placed on learning in the workplace. All except a few organisations expected to maintain their current level of engagement.

- **Successful partnerships were frequently attributed to the enthusiasm and actions of individuals in colleges and on the employer side**. This dependence was highlighted by the departure of key managers. Difficulties experienced in lines

of communication with colleges and universities were a common complaint. Given their sponsorship of students and programmes, employers felt they should receive more regular and customised reporting of the attendance and progress of their employees. Despite this, most enterprises looked to maintain their forms and levels of collaboration, and a few expected to extend them. A number saw their hand strengthened in future, especially if they were meeting some or all of the higher fee levels charged by college and university providers.

These findings are detailed in Chapter 6.

Synthesis, discussion and conclusions

HE courses in colleges are characterised by greater heterogeneity than courses in higher education institutions. High-level distinctions between prescribed and non-prescribed, validated and franchised, 'academic' and 'vocational' courses only scratch the surface of this heterogeneity. This makes it difficult to make valid generalisations about HE-in-FE.

Closely linked to this heterogeneity are flexibility, responsiveness and adaptability. These characteristics arise from a number of factors – the constant pressure to meet changing demands from potential students and employers, the need to satisfy the requirements of accreditation and validation, and the more flexible management culture of FECs.

The heterogeneity and adaptability of HE-in-FE also leads to a lack of definition. Distinctions between directly funded and franchised student numbers and prescribed and non-prescribed courses, and the lack of a separate organisation of HE courses in FECs, make it difficult to grasp the totality of this provision (in the eyes of potential students and employers). The adaptability of colleges may also compromise the development of coherent long-term strategies for HE courses. Equally the same characteristics may make it more difficult to develop national policy frameworks.

This lack of definition may contribute to different views about the distinctiveness of HE-in-FE. FEC managers (and, to a significant extent, their colleagues in partner HEIs) have the clearest sense of the distinctiveness of HE-in-FE – while employers are most reluctant to distinguish between broad institutional types, preferring instead to focus on what individual institutions (whether FECs or HEIs) or even individual courses can offer. HE students in FECs are in the middle, sometimes appearing to be confused about their identity.

FECs are likely to be able to make a significant, but perhaps not spectacular, contribution to future student growth. Most are expecting only modest growth, although a few colleges which already have a significant stake in HE have more ambitious plans. A key advantage enjoyed by FECs is their ability to reach students that HEIs, even those with a strong widening participation ethos, struggle to reach. These are predominantly (very) local students who for various reasons are not easily mobile.

The same theme of 'localism' means that colleges have an important contribution to make to widening participation. Their ability to attract local students, and also to offer less confident students a more supportive learning environment, is probably more

important than any differences in the socio-economic status of HE students in FECs compared with students in HEIs, for which there is some limited evidence.

It is less clear that colleges are able to offer substantially more flexible provision than HEIs. Although their management cultures and organisational structures promote greater adaptability, colleges are subject to significant external constraints imposed not just by validating HEIs but also professional bodies and employers accrediting agencies.

Colleges are able to offer more cost-effective delivery than HEIs – but perhaps less decisively so than is sometimes claimed. Although they have lower cost bases (especially in terms of staffing), they lack the economies-of-scale that most HEIs enjoy. They are also offering a different experience, more focused on the classroom, and offer more limited extra-curricular opportunities to their students.

FECs already make an important contribution to the diversity of HE in England – and that contribution is likely to increase. However, this contribution is made within a framework of incrementalism, i.e. the overall growth of an increasingly diverse HE system. To produce a step-change in the contribution of FECs to the delivery of HE – analogous perhaps to the role played by community colleges in the United States – will require a decisive (and sustained) policy shift.

The overall findings and conclusions are brought together in Chapter 7.

1 Introduction

This is a report on the findings of research undertaken for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to understand the current nature of higher education in further education colleges in England; and to consider the opportunities for expanding such provision.

The research involved a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches:

- a review of recent relevant literature;
- a statistical analysis of administrative data on higher education students and courses taught in further education colleges;
- fieldwork in further education colleges offering courses of higher education;
- interviews with senior managers in colleges and partner higher education institutions (HEIs);
- a questionnaire survey of higher education students taught in FECs;
- in-class discussion groups of higher education students in FECs;
- interviews with employers involved with higher education in FECs.

The study was undertaken between March 2011 and March 2012 by a team from the University of Sheffield and the Institute of Education, University of London.

A project team and a fieldwork team carried out the research. The members of the project team were Claire Callender, Gareth Parry, Peter Scott and Paul Temple. The members of the fieldwork team were Maggie Greenwood, Esther Lockley, Bethan O'Neill, Will Thomas and Anne Thompson. The statistical analysis conducted for this study at the Higher Education Funding Council for England was undertaken by Andy Breeze. Inside the project, the statistical work was undertaken by Sammy Rashid. The fieldwork was coordinated by Anne Thompson who also contributed to the review of literature and (with other members of the fieldwork team) to the design and piloting of instruments and the analysis of the employer interview data.

The interviews with senior managers in colleges and partner HEIs were undertaken by the project team. The fieldwork in FECs, the administration of the student survey, the in-class discussion groups and the interviews with employers were carried out by the fieldwork team. Production of the questionnaire and the processing of data were carried our by a survey company, GfK NOP. David Wilkinson undertook the analysis of the student survey data.

An early decision was taken to guarantee the anonymity of all colleges, universities and employers participating in the research. The same guarantee was extended to all students, staff and employer representatives as well as confidentiality in the use and reporting of in-

class discussion groups and individual interviews. Their involvement is gratefully acknowledged. In several cases, organisations were being restructured, merged, inspected or reviewed during the period of the research. Students and tutors allowed the fieldwork team to administer a questionnaire during class time. For some students, this also included their participation in a discussion group following completion of the questionnaire. The study was reliant on college managers making contact with tutors and linked employers on behalf of the fieldwork team. Foundation Degree Forward made contact with the employers on their database and sought their permission to be contacted by the research team.

A steering group composed of policy officers from BIS, the Association of Colleges (AoC), the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS) and the Skills Funding Agency commented on the design of research instruments, the compilation of literature sources, the summaries of emerging findings and a draft of the final report.

The evidence drawn together from these strands of work provides a cross-sectional picture of higher education provision and student participation in FECs, including the perspectives and experiences of institutional managers, students and employers. Although the research is focused on higher education in further education institutions, the study takes account where appropriate of comparisons between undergraduate and higher-level education in the further education and higher education sectors.

1.1 Report structure

This chapter sets the scene for the study (pointing to themes and issues explored in the remainder of the report), then outlines the research aim and objectives, and provides an overview of the methodology and methods employed in the project.

Chapter 2 looks at the contemporary history, development and character of higher education in the further education sector in England. It reviews the policies and practices addressed to the organisation, management, funding and quality assurance of this provision, including collaborative arrangements for franchising and validation. The scale, shape and scope of this activity are described. The role of colleges in extending participation, progression and work-focused provision in higher education is highlighted.

Chapter 3 presents detailed statistical information on the higher education courses, qualifications and students taught in further education colleges, alongside that for higher education institutions. The distribution of higher education by region, by type of provider and by the number of funding partnerships between FECs and HEIs is reported. Course characteristics are compared by qualification aim, funding route, mode of study and type of subject. Student characteristics are compared by gender, age, ethnicity and disability, and by widening participation profile and highest qualification on entry.

Chapter 4 takes an institutional perspective and reports the views of two sets of managers: college Principals and higher education managers in the further education sector; and senior managers in HEIs responsible for partnerships with further education colleges. For FECs, the rationales for their involvement in higher education are examined. The organisation, costs, quality and standards of provision, including the student experience and collaboration with HEIs, are considered. For HEIs, the strategic drivers for

partnerships with FECs are explored. The character and conduct of these relationships are outlined, including fee charging, the quality of teaching and nature of the student experience. For both parties, their present and future plans are reviewed.

Chapter 5 reports on student perspectives. It analyses the views of a sample of students undertaking higher education programmes in FECs. Their decisions and choices about where to study are examined, including their reasons for taking a course at a college rather than a university. Their courses and fees, their experiences of study and their perceptions of college are explored. Their individual, family and household circumstances are described, including patterns of study, travel, work and care responsibilities. Future intentions regarding education, training and employment are also indicated.

Chapter 6 focuses on employer perspectives and reports on the views of organisations involved with higher education courses in FECs and HEIs. The nature, pattern and intensity of this involvement are traced. On recruitment from FECs and HEIs, the preferences and requirements of employers for individuals with a Bachelor's Degree and with sub-Bachelor qualifications are examined. On collaboration with FECs and HEIs, including course design and delivery, the preferences and involvements of employers on programmes of continuing professional development are explored. Future changes in recruitment policies and collaborative activities are noted.

Chapter 7 synthesises the core findings from the strands of work. The implications of the findings for expanding provision, widening participation, promoting flexibility and achieving cost-effectiveness are considered. Conclusions are drawn and reflections are made on future patterns of development and directions of change.

1.2 Researching higher education in further education colleges

In the recent years, the location of higher education in further education colleges has attracted increasing attention from governments and policymakers. On the one side, the teaching of higher education courses in these settings has been a key element in policies aimed at overall expansion, widening participation and greater diversification of the system. On the other, the vocational orientation of many FECs and their closeness to the world of work has aligned them with strategies to improve the skills base of the current and future workforce, especially at the higher levels.

At the same time, it was believed that FECs offered a cost-effective way of expanding places in higher education, that their programmes could be delivered more flexibly and rapidly in response to demand, and that local colleges were likely to be more accessible to, and used by, the groups targeted by government policies for widening participation (including those from disadvantaged backgrounds). These or similar claims have been advanced by representative bodies in the college sector, including the AoC, the Mixed Economy Group (MEG) and the 157 Group of colleges. They are signalled as well in government and other official statements. While the aim and objectives set for the present study are referenced solely to higher education in the further education sector, the research is expected to help test or shed light on some of these beliefs.

Although a focus of policy, the higher education in FECs is not well understood. This is explained by a number of features and factors. Firstly, such provision is located outside the higher education sector and distributed, usually in small amounts, across a large

number of colleges predominantly concerned with teaching at the further education levels. Secondly, most college-taught courses of higher education – but not all – lead to qualifications at levels below the Bachelor's Degree, frequently with progression agreements in place for students to transfer to HEIs to complete the final stages of a linked Bachelor's programme. Thirdly, much of this provision is studied on a part-time basis, often by adults in employment and sometimes in conjunction with employers for the continuing professional education of their employees.

These are patterns, levels and styles of higher education that attract less notice (and generally less status) than the 'mainstream' undergraduate education studied on a full-time basis by young people at HEIs. In some quarters, this provision is not regarded as a normal part of higher education. For a few, it is not 'real' higher education. On the other hand, a majority of HEIs now fund or award its qualifications, the external quality bodies assess its programmes and standards, and employers collaborate with colleges in the recruitment and continuing education and training of their workforce. Comprehending the intricate character of this activity is a complicated task.

Researching this segment of higher education is no less straightforward. There are specific difficulties that confront both the compilation and analysis of secondary data and the collection of primary data. Not only do these help to explain why the area is little investigated. They also indicate the limitations that attach to time series data and comparisons between higher education in FECs and HEIs. A central problem for research and analysis is that responsibility for the funding and quality assessment of higher education in FECs rests with parallel organisations in the higher education sector and the further education sector, with major implications for how this provision is counted, defined and reported. The result is a high degree of complexity in a relatively small segment of the higher education system.

1.2.1 Data collection and coverage

The higher education courses taught in FECs are publicly funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and by the funding body for post-19 education and training, the Skills Funding Agency. Furthermore, funding by HEFCE is either direct to the FEC or indirect through one or more HEIs. Where a college is funded directly, the higher education students are, in nearly all cases, registered and taught at the FEC. Where a college is funded indirectly, the higher education students are registered at a HEI and taught (in whole or part) at the FEC. This sub-contracting of the teaching function from a HEI to a FEC is commonly styled 'franchising'.

As a result of these multiple funding arrangements, it is not easy to describe the total population of higher education students, programmes and qualifications taught in the further education sector. To do this, it is necessary to bring together data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency and from the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) collected by the Data Agency. However, the data requested from HEIs by HESA and requested from FECs (and other providers in the larger further education system) by the Data Agency are collected on different bases and are not directly comparable. Nor is it possible to identify the level of some higher education programmes in the ILR, especially among the higher-level qualifications funded by the SFA or where the full cost is met by the student or employer.

For this reason, there is no integrated set of official statistics and no extended or detailed time series published on higher education taught in FECs in England. Rather, HESA and the Data Agency produce separate and discrete sets of statistical information. For its part, HEFCE has compiled annual tables on franchised students derived from HESA data collections, although these were not published after 2008. Again, these do not form a time series because the underlying populations used have changed between years.

For this study, HEFCE have produced tables on the total population of higher education students in England in 2009-10 by the location of teaching in HEIs, FECs and other providers in the further education system. In this way, HESA and ILR records were combined to produce integrated datasets describing the characteristics of all students and courses taught in FECs and permitting comparisons to be made with those taught in HEIs and other providers in the same year. These are tables are set out in Chapter 3. Included here are tables presenting data from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey. For this survey, higher education students studying on franchised courses in FECs are included the return made by HEIs but those on directly funded courses in colleges were not included until 2008-09.

Data is also collected by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) on applicants and acceptances to HE courses at those FECs (currently over 100 colleges) in memberships of the admissions service. UCAS is an admissions system for full-time undergraduate education. In the further education sector, this area of provision accounts for a minority of the higher education students taught in colleges. Furthermore, some of the entrants to full-time undergraduate courses in FECs will be taught on behalf of partner HEIs and counted as their numbers.

1.2.2 Dual sectors and definitions

Another consequence of higher education offered in a two-sector system of further education and higher education is that definitions differ or appear ambiguous in respect of basic terminologies and measures. Two examples are the definitions of higher education and its modes of study. In the case of higher education, differences arise as to where the boundary should be drawn: between the higher education provision supported by HEFCE and the higher-level provision funded by the SFA; or including both categories of provision. In respect of modes of study, there are differences in the way that full-time and part-time education is defined in the two sectors.

The ‘prescribed’ courses of higher education eligible for public funding by HEFCE have often served as a marker of the boundary of higher education in England. However, as already noted, the SFA and its predecessor bodies (the Learning and Skills Council and before that the Further Education Funding Council) have the power to fund certain categories of education and training at the higher levels. Basically, these are the higher-level programmes and qualifications falling outside the schedule of prescribed courses of higher education. They span an assortment of professional, vocational and technical qualifications, often linked to specific occupations and whose purpose is often to confirm occupational competence or confer professional recognition and registration.

A broad definition of higher education – as adopted in this study – would include prescribed and non-prescribed provision. A definition based on prescribed courses has followed conventional usage by HEFCE, as reflected in its standard tables of statistics and many of its documents on higher education in FECs. The definition is also reproduced in

the organisation of some colleges, with that described as higher education reserved for HEFCE-supported programmes (direct or indirectly funded) and that related to higher-level education and training funded by the SFA (or another organisation) managed as part of the further education provision in the institution.

The classification and conception of full-time and part-time study in each sector is another definitional issue of importance to research and understanding. HESA applies a 24 week rule in its definition of full-time but each of the higher education funding councils in the United Kingdom may also have further additional conditions. For HEFCE, a year of programme of study is counted as full-time if it meets all of the following criteria: the student is normally required to attend an institution, or elsewhere, for periods amounting to at least 24 weeks within the year of programme of study and, during that time, they are normally expected to undertake periods of study, tuition, learning in the workplace or sandwich placement, which amount to an average of at least 21 hours per week; and full-time regulated fees are chargeable for the course for the year. A student is counted as part-time if the programme of study does not meet these requirements, including HNC students who are expected to complete in one year, but whose course is not subject to regulated fees.

For the SFA, a qualification aim or programme of aims is counted as full-time if it is delivered in 450 or more 'guided learning hours' within one funding year (or that the aim involves 16 guided learning hours or more per week. In its guidance to HEFCE-funded colleges on how to return its annual Higher Education in Further Education: Students Survey, HEFCE states that guided learning hours should not be used in isolation to determine how many hours a week a student spends studying. All guided learning hours count towards this total, but it is expected that higher education students will spend a significant amount of time each week in self-led individual learning, and an estimate of this time should be included in the return.

On a different front, there is also inconsistency in how the terms 'sector' and 'system' are used in official documents. In this study, the higher education sector refers to the higher education institutions in membership of HEFCE. The higher education system includes these institutions and all other providers of higher education outside the higher education sector, including FECs. The further education sector refers to the four categories of further education institution classified administratively for this purpose: general further education colleges; specialist further education colleges; specialist designated institutions; and sixth form colleges. The further education system includes a variety of providers –public, private and voluntary – outside the further education sector. The latter is now commonly styled the further education and skills system.

In this study, the terms further education college and further education institution are used interchangeably for organisations in membership of the FE sector. These terms occasionally get used to refer to some but not all organisations in the further education sector. They are also occasionally employed to describe all providers in the further education and skills system. These usages help to explain the variation in numbers sometimes given for higher education taught in the world of further education. For clarity, most of the tables presented in Chapter 3 distinguish between HEIs and FECs. A small number of tables include a third category of other providers in the FE system.

The development of separate qualifications frameworks for higher education and for further and secondary education was, until recently, a source of some additional confusion. There is now a single Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) which aligns with the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications maintained by the QAA. In the QCF, there are nine levels. The further and secondary education levels are at Entry Level, Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3. The higher education levels are at Levels 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. The QCF levels are used in this report. In the ILR, some higher level qualifications are still described in terms of an earlier system of levels. Some other higher level qualifications are simply labelled 'HE'. The survival of these usages makes it difficult or impossible to align these qualifications with levels in the QCF.

In this report, the non-prescribed higher education in the ILR is categorised as 'other higher level' and, for the reasons given, its qualifications span the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The prescribed higher education in the HESA and ILR collections is categorised by three levels of qualification: postgraduate; Bachelor's Degree; and other undergraduate (Foundation Degree, HND, HNC, DipHE and CertHE). By undergraduate education is meant prescribed higher education at the Bachelors' and other undergraduate levels.

1.2.3 Quality monitoring and reporting

The separate funding streams for higher education in FECs – direct or indirect by HEFCE and that through the SFA – also result in separate and different methods of quality monitoring and reporting by external agencies. The directly funded and franchised provision taught in colleges is subject to quality review by the QAA. By contrast, the programmes supported by the SFA come under the common inspection framework for further education and skills applied to FECs by Ofsted.

Whereas the review methods of the QAA are focused wholly on the higher education taught in colleges, the general inspections conducted by Ofsted are addressed to the overall provision of further education in colleges. Reviews by the QAA are concerned with the effectiveness of colleges in maintaining and managing the standards of higher education qualifications and the quality of the student learning experience. Inspections by Ofsted are concerned with the overall effectiveness of colleges in meeting the needs of further education students. These might include higher-level qualifications in the areas chosen for examination by Ofsted inspectors but they are rarely accorded special scrutiny or separate commentary. Differences in their focus, approach, terminologies and methods are accompanied by different grading scales and, for a study like the present one, an uneven source of material to assist understanding.

Unlike the college by college review reports published by the QAA, complemented by overview documents summarising the outcomes and lessons of these exercises, the Ofsted reports offer a thin seam of evidence on the higher-level provision funded by the SFA. Furthermore, the two-stage process of developmental engagement and summative review in the QAA methodology not only brings together quality enhancement and quality assessment, it generates wide-ranging information on the higher education offered in colleges. Included here is consideration of college strategies for managing higher education, internal quality systems, relationships with awarding bodies, links with employers, areas of scholarly activity and the involvement of students in quality assurance.

That said, the QAA methodology has been developed specifically for higher education in FECs and, while it makes available public information on quality and standards in a similar form to that for HEIs, the audit approach applied to higher education institutions is not directly comparable. However, with institutional review now established as the replacement for institutional audit in HEIs, and with a new review method proposed for higher education in the colleges, a core of common criteria will be used in future against which all FECs and all HEIs will be judged.

The significance of dual sectors for the forms taken by higher education in FECs, including the associated responsibilities for policy development, funding, quality and data collection, is reviewed in Chapter 2.

1.3 Research aim and objectives

The overall aim of the study is to describe and analyse the current pattern of provision, participation and collaboration in college-based higher education in order to:

- identify the features of successful provision, including their accessibility, flexibility, responsiveness and cost-effectiveness;
- consider where the opportunities for expansion might best be found, whether through the growth of current successful provision or by the stimulation of new activity;
- encourage participation by those groups targeted by government policies for widening participation.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To describe the scale, scope and shape of higher education in the major types of further education colleges by size, region, type of funding, qualifications profile, mode of study, subject range, partnership arrangements and – where available – patterns of progression and completion.
2. To explore the strategic intentions of college Principals and other senior managers with regard to the future development of higher education provision, whether in partnership with universities or independently.
3. To consider the strategic intentions of partner universities with regard to the future of collaborative arrangements for funding, validation and progression.
4. To examine the choice-making and experience of the major groups of higher education students in further education institutions by age, gender, socio-economic background, qualification aim, type of subject, mode of study and place of registration.
5. To explore the views and valuations of the major types of employers currently engaged in college-based and university-located higher education by region, sector, size and nature of involvement.

1.4 Overview of methodology and methods

To address and achieve these goals, a range of research activities was undertaken. Each of these methodological strands is described below. Further details are found in the chapters reporting the findings based on these methods as well as in a technical appendix (Chapter 9).

1.4.1 Analysis of administrative data

Statistical information on higher education students, courses and providers in the further education sector was assembled and analysed for two main purposes. Firstly, this provided baseline data for the selection of case-study colleges and for the target numbers used in administering the student survey. Secondly, it provided the key sources of data to examine patterns of higher education provision and participation within the further education sector and between the FE and HE sectors.

Data sets from HESA and the ILR were made available through BIS and were combined with the aid of a fuzzy-matching tool supplied by HEFCE. The selection of case-study colleges was based on an integrated dataset for 2006-07 held at the University of Sheffield (the only integrated dataset available at the start of the research). The target numbers for the student survey and for the reporting of system-wide patterns was based on an integrated dataset subsequently produced for 2009-10 (the most recently available data at the time of the study). For reasons of clarity and consistency, it was agreed at the beginning of the research that the system-wide numbers supplied and composed by HEFCE would be adopted in this report. This data is presented and discussed in Chapter 3.

1.4.2 Review of literature

The literature on higher education in FECs in England is small and the number of published research and evaluation studies is few. A database of sources was created and classified by theme: policy and history; provision and participation; management and governance; funding and costs; quality and standards; collaboration and partnerships; curriculum and qualifications; teaching and learning; staffing and scholarly activity; the student experience; employment and employers; and international and comparative.

The database of sources was updated on a regular basis and shared with members of the steering group. The literature was systematically reviewed in terms of the aim and objectives of the research. This process informed the design of the major research instruments, including the selection of themes and questions asked in the student survey, in the interviews with senior managers in FECs and partner HEIs, and in the interviews with employers. The results of the review underpin the account of the main features of the college contribution to higher education and higher-level qualifications in England, including its history, policy and quality. This contextual overview is the subject of Chapter 2.

1.4.3 Fieldwork in case-study colleges

A total of 25 case-study colleges were chosen as sites for the student survey, for in-class discussions with groups of students, and for interviews with college principals and senior managers responsible for higher education. The case-study colleges were also used to

identify the partner HEIs for interview by the project team and a majority of the employers selected for interview by the fieldwork team. Selection of the case-study colleges was on the basis of the size and nature of higher education provision; the regional and sub-regional context; and the number and type of partnerships with HEIs.

Collaboration and good working relations with the case-study colleges were of central importance in the design and conduct of the research. A team of five fieldworkers (each fieldworker working with five colleges) was responsible for gathering information on the higher education and higher-level qualifications taught at each institution, including documents reporting QAA reviews, Ofsted inspections, their strategies for higher education and their partnership agreements with HEIs (covering matters such as franchising, validation and progression).

This information was made available to the project team ahead of the interviews with college managers and senior personnel in partner HEIs. Data provided by the case-study colleges on their current higher education programmes and students informed the selection of courses to receive the questionnaire for the student survey. Permission for the fieldwork team to contact employers was undertaken by the case-study colleges. Both the administration of the student survey and the telephone interviews with employers were carried out by the fieldwork team.

1.4.4 Interviews with managers in FECs and partner universities

Face-to-face interviews with the senior managers in each case-study college – including principals and higher education managers – were used to build a picture of how higher education was viewed, organised, managed, developed and taught in these institutions.

Telephone interviews with senior personnel – mostly Pro-Vice-Chancellors – at the higher education institutions in partnership with a third of the case-study colleges were employed to understand how and why such relationships (generally and specifically) were pursued, operated and valued.

Although they were likely to be interpreted from different perspectives, the interviews with college managers and partner HEIs were addressed to a similar set of themes and issues. These included the rationale for such undertakings; the reasons for patterns of growth (or decline) and change; the sources of present and potential future demand; the features of collaboration; the comparable costs and experience of higher education in college and university settings; and the capacity for expansion and its levers and limits. The findings are presented and reviewed in Chapter 4.

1.4.5 Survey of college students

A paper-based survey of a representative sample of higher education students was administered in the 25 case-study colleges using a questionnaire completed during class time. The survey gathered information on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of students; their motivations for higher education study; their choice of course and institution; their applications and offers at other establishments; their views on studying at a college compared with studying in a university; their locations, modes and conditions of study; their tuition fees and means of support; their employment expectations; and their plans to take another course of study.

Based on administrative data on higher education in further education colleges for 2009 - 10, target numbers were identified for part-time and full-time modes of study and for three qualification types (Bachelor; other undergraduate; and other higher level) at each case-study college. An analysis of weighted data for students studying for Bachelor and other undergraduate qualifications is presented in tables and cross-tabulations in Chapter 5. Unweighted data for students studying for other higher level qualifications is reported in a separate appendix (Chapter 10).

1.4.6 In-class discussion groups

At each case-study college, arrangements were made to hold one discussion group with students after they had completed the questionnaire. Groups were selected to reflect a range of qualification and subject types, modes of study and year of study. The discussion was informal and followed the topics in the student survey, including their reasons for studying at the college rather than elsewhere. The insights and illustrations from this data are among the findings reported and considered in Chapter 5.

1.4.7 Interviews with employers

Telephone interviews were conducted with a range of organisations that recruited higher education students from FECs and HEIs; collaborated with FECs and HEIs on programmes of continuing professional development; or were involved in both activities. They included private, public and not-for-profit organisations across different sectors of employment and with local, regional, national or international spheres of operation. The size of the workforce ranged widely, with micro businesses at one end and large enterprises with multiple sites at the other.

Employers were asked about the nature and extent of their involvement with FECs and HEIs, about how they viewed the two types of institution as providers of higher education, and whether they valued them differently. Data was collected on their policies and practices on recruitment; on their requirements, expectations and support for employees to undertake continuing education and training; on their experience of working with FECs and HEIs; and about how these involvements were or might be changing. The views and valuations arising from these interviews are reported and discussed in Chapter 6.

1.5 Policy development and research timetable

The conduct of the research coincided with the announcement of major Government reforms in higher education and a strategy to reform the further education and skills system. In higher education, the publication of a White Paper in June 2011 was immediately followed by a series of specific consultations running alongside the consultation on the overall package of proposals. Consultation on the implementation of new student number controls opened in June and closed in September 2011. Consultation on the regulatory framework for institutions in the higher education system opened in August and closed in October 2011.

Soon after the consultation on student number controls closed, FECs and HEIs were invited to bid for numbers in 2012-13 from a ‘margin’ of up to 20,000 places. Only those institutions intending to charge an average full-time undergraduate fee of £7500 or less (after tuition fee waivers) were eligible to enter the competition. To encourage institutions to set their fees below this level, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) invited FECs and HEIs

to apply to revise their existing access agreements (or seek a new agreement if they did not currently have one). Individual institutions were informed of the outcome of their bids in January 2012.

In the further education sector, colleges had already been consulted on the future direction of skills policy in 2010. In August 2011, a consultation on the reform programme for the further education of adults was opened. A second and specific consultation on a further education loan system, operating on the same basis as in higher education and available from 2013/14, was opened. The loans will apply to provision at Level 3 and Level 4 (including advanced and higher-level apprenticeships) and be available to those aged 24 and over. FECs and HEIs were among the organisations invited by the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) to apply for higher apprenticeship places in June 2011.

This rapidly changing context for policy development in higher, further and adult education meant that different strands of research were undertaken at different points in the policy cycle. Some, like the interviews with college managers, began prior to publication of the White Paper on higher education and continued through the consultation and bidding phases. The timing of these research activities is likely to have been an influence on how respondents framed their views. The relationship between policy development and the timetable of the research is shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Policy developments and the timetable of research

		Secondary data analysis	**Review of literature**	**Fieldwork in case-study FECs**	**FEC manager interviews**	**Partner HEI interviews**	**Survey of students + discussion groups**	**Employer interviews**
2011								
M		•						
A		•	•					
M		•	•	•	•			
J	*BIS White Paper* *on higher education* *HEFCE consultation on teaching funding and student number controls for 2012-13.*	•	•	•	•			

		Secondary data analysis	Review of literature	Fieldwork in case-study FECs	FEC manager interviews	Partner HEI interviews	Survey of students + discussion groups	Employer interviews
	NAS invitation to apply for higher apprenticeship places							
J		•		•	•			
A	*BIS consultation on regulatory framework* *BIS consultation on further* *education reform*							
S	*OFFA guidance on submission of revised access agreements*	•	•	•	•	•		
O	*HEFCE invitation to bid for student places*	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
N	*HEFCE deadline for receipt of bids for student places*	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
D	*OFFA approval of revised access agreements* *UCAS notification to applicants of changes to access agreements* *BIS Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan*	•	•	•		•	•	•
2012								
J	*HEFCE announcement to institutions of award of*	•	•			•		•

		Secondary data analysis	Review of literature	Fieldwork in case-study FECs	FEC manager interviews	Partner HEI interviews	Survey of students + discussion groups	Employer interviews
	student places							
F		•	•					•
M	*HEFCE consultation on teaching funding and student number control for 2013-14 and beyond*		•					•

The content of these and other reforms relevant to higher education in FECs is discussed in the next chapter where the contemporary pattern and direction of policy development, provision and practice is charted.

2 Context and overview

In this chapter, the context and character of higher education in further education institutions is outlined. Drawing on the evidence of the literature review, its history, policy and development in England is traced. The nature and extent of this provision is outlined, including its courses and qualifications, its costs and sources of funding, its quality assurance, and the role of HEIs and employers. Patterns of student access, participation and progression are summarised along with the main features of teaching and learning. In reviewing this evidence, reference is made to the administrative data presented in Chapter 3 which supplies a detailed and up-to-date picture of some of these patterns.

The evidence for much of this overview is dependent on official sources, including research, evaluation and analyses carried out by, and for, sector bodies and representative organisations. The works published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England account for a significant proportion of this literature. In recent years, surveys by the Association of Colleges and investigations by the Mixed Economy Group of colleges have added to the body of information and intelligence.

The volume of independent research and academic inquiry is small (Tight 2009). As a consequence, the investigation and coverage of themes is uneven: with generally more written about policy, management and organisation; and relatively little on the costs of provision, the experiences of students and the perspectives of employers. A growing literature has developed around strategy, teaching and scholarly activity. Small-scale studies are common, often with limited scope for generalisation or comparison.

Before considering each of these aspects, the immediate context for the present research is described. Following the election a new Government in 2010, the policy context for higher education in FECs has changed, with new reform programmes announced for higher education and further education that bear directly on the future scale, shape and direction of college-based higher education and higher-level qualifications.

2.1 Government policy and the context for the research

The invitation to tender for this study was announced in January 2011. This was ahead of the publication of a White Paper on higher education in June 2011 and shortly after the Government had won a vote in the House of Commons in December 2010 to raise the cap on tuition fees for full-time undergraduate education. From 2012-13, institutions would be able to charge up to £6000 a year and, subject to strict conditions on widening participation and fair access, some institutions would be able to charge up to £9000 a year. When first announced, the £9000 maximum was expected to be charged in exceptional cases. In the event, a large number of HEIs indicated their intention to set fees at this level or close to it. The Government then examined ways to achieve a lowering of the average fee level and the chosen method or methods published in a delayed White Paper.

Many of the proposals in the White Paper drew on recommendations of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (the Browne review, 2009-10) established by the previous Government (BIS 2009). The review was asked to address the

future of fees policy and financial support for full-time and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students. Its report proposed a 'radical departure' from existing arrangements (Independent Review 2010). Rather than providing HEIs with a block grant for teaching, the review recommended that funding should follow the individual student; and that, to increase student choice, popular HEIs should be allowed to expand to meet demand. Provided they showed improvements in the student experience and demonstrated progress in providing fair access, the report argued, institutions should be allowed to charge different and higher fees.

Soon after receiving the report, the Government endorsed the principle of student-led funding and announced a nearly three-fold increase in the maximum level of fee for 2012-13. A cap on fees would however remain: at the new level of £9000. The costs of tuition for both full-time and part-time undergraduate education would be covered by loans, with repayment on an income-contingent basis.

The extension of loans to some part-time students was also a recommendation of the review panel. This proposal had important implications for higher education in FECs where the majority of study is on a part-time basis, was not discussed. However, there was no mention of FECs in the review report and there was no recognition that some colleges already set fees below the maximum level.

By contrast, the statements from ministers that followed the review emphasised the 'distinctive value' of higher education in FECs, especially its role in providing choice for students and driving efficiency throughout the system. The future White Paper would need therefore to look afresh at 'anomalies', such as the distinction between prescribed and non-prescribed higher education. More pressing were concerns that some HEIs might revise their validation charges and franchise arrangements in light of changes in the system, so potentially hindering the development of higher education in the colleges.

> *Such deliberatively anti-competitive behaviour is unacceptable … Universities should not impede cost-effective provision of HE by colleges … It will be a backwards step if FE colleges are squeezed out of the market by universities seeking to claw back franchised places. In the White Paper, we will be looking at how we can free FE colleges from these risks (Willetts 2011).*

2.1.1 Colleges in the 2011 White Paper on higher education

The White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS 2011c) proposed opening up the higher education market to further education colleges and alternative providers. The FECs in England that taught courses of higher education are, it noted, among more than 1600 bodies – public and private, home and overseas – offering some kind of UK higher education provision. These bodies are diverse in their aims and audiences but further education colleges have a 'distinctive mission'. They offer local, accessible, flexible and vocational forms of higher education to adults and young people from a range of educational and social backgrounds:

> *Colleges have displayed particular strengths in reaching out to non-traditional higher education learners including mature and part-time students. They also have a distinctive mission particularly in delivering locally-relevant, vocational*

> *higher-level skills such as HNCs, HNDs, Foundation Degrees and Apprenticeships.*
>
> *Further education colleges also offer professional qualifications and awards which are predominantly studied part-time by people over 25 in employment. This kind of learning is increasingly being offered on a very flexible basis, including distance and online learning. Students are often able to take a break from their courses, which helps them build their study around their working and family responsibilities. We recognise the importance of this type of higher education provision (sometimes called "non-prescribed") and will consider how it relates to other forms of provision. (BIS, 2011c, p. 46)*

Nevertheless, there are 'barriers to fair competition' and the current rules controlling student numbers and awarding degrees make it difficult for colleges to compete with universities for students. Indirect funding and validation arrangements are examples where the system treated FECs and HEIs 'very differently':

> *In some cases, universities enter into franchise arrangements with a college where the university "owns" the student places and allocates them to the college. These can get difficult at a time when student number growth is tightly constrained for all providers. Even where a college has its own student number allocation, it may need a higher education institution, with degree-awarding powers, to validate its degree. There are some long-standing and successful partnerships, but either party can withdraw or seek to renegotiate the arrangement, which can cause friction. (ibid. p.47)*

To create a level playing field for all providers, a single regulatory framework is intended for the whole of the higher education system. A technical consultation on the new regulatory framework, with HEFCE as lead regulator, opened in August and closed in October 2011.

As part of establishing this framework, the criteria and the process for granting and renewing taught degree-awarding powers at undergraduate level will be reviewed, with a proposal to allow non-teaching organisations to award degrees. More bodies with such powers or an extension of the external degree model could increase choice for students including 'the possibility of progressing directly to a degree with a national awarding body brand'. They should appeal as well to colleges 'whose ability to provide higher education is dependent on a university being willing to validate their degrees'. In particular:

> *Models that allow awarding bodies to hold degree-awarding powers could provide a clear progression model and a new nationally recognised offer for higher education provided by further education colleges ("HE in FE"). (ibid. p.73)*

With the exception of colleges granted powers to award Foundation Degrees, further education institutions do not award their own degrees. Foundation Degree-awarding powers were made available to FECs by legislation in 2007 and the first two colleges granted these powers were approved in 2011. No changes to these powers are proposed in the White Paper but they will be reviewed in 2012. Nor is it intended to extend the title of 'college of further and higher education' beyond those FECs who have a minimum of 10%

of their full-time equivalent students in higher education and a minimum number of 500 full-time equivalent higher education students. These criteria will also be reviewed in 2012. Some in the further education sector had called for the higher education contribution of FECs to be recognised through a distinctive title of this kind.

In the longer term, the White Paper expected to see better alignment of the quality review processes applied to FECs and HEIs, 'for the sake of coherence and simplicity'. Similarly, the agencies responsible for data collection, in collaboration with HEFCE and the SFA, are asked to promote 'simplification and alignment' across both the higher and further education sectors.

The funding reforms in the White Paper are intended to develop a demand-led system for the funding of teaching which will promote student choice and greater competition between providers. To support these aims as well as drive efficiency, quality and innovation, the Government announced a 'core and margin' model to 'free up student number controls, while ensuring that overall costs are managed'. Administered by HEFCE, this involved two changes to the way in which student number controls would operate from 2012-13.

The first allowed unrestricted recruitment of high-achieving students (those with grades AAB or higher at A-Level). The second allowed higher education providers that 'combine good quality with value for money' and whose average fee (after fee waivers) is at or below £7500 to expand by competing for a share of about 20,000 student places. The places (the margin) would be made available by reducing the core student number control allocations of all institutions (after the removal of AAB+ students). Institutions would bid for a share of these places against agreed criteria. In this manner, every institution will have to compete year to year for the student numbers outside its core allocation and 'the core will reduce every year'.

It is in the second of these two competitions that a wider range of providers should find it easier to offer and gain places, that responsiveness and a diversity of provision should be enabled, and that the overall cost to the taxpayer should be reduced. In short:

> *This will make it easier for further education colleges, new entrants and other non-traditional providers that can attract students, to expand to meet to demand. (ibid., p. 52)*

and

> *We expect this to mean more higher education in further education colleges, more variety in modes of learning and wholly new providers delivering innovative forms of higher education.' (ibid., p. 3)*

2.1.2 Higher education in the reform plan for further education and skills

The significance of the White Paper reforms, together with separate and parallel measures to support students and courses leading to higher-level qualifications, are set out in New Challenges, New Chances: Further Education and Skills System Reform Plan (BIS 2011d). This plan implements the strategy for reform of the further education and skills system for adults aged 19 and over in England, as originally set out in Skills for Sustainable Growth (BIS 2010a).

Alongside expansion of the numbers of adult apprenticeships, the strategy proposed 'fully funded' training for young adults undertaking their first full Level 2 or first Level 3 qualification and basic skills courses for individuals to improve their levels of literacy and numeracy. For adults needing to gain 'intermediate and higher-level skills', Government-backed further education loans would be introduced from 2013-14, operated on the same basis as loans in higher education. In the higher education system, students starting part-time undergraduate courses in 2012-13 are entitled to a loan to meet their tuition costs so long as they are studying at an intensity of at least 25%, in each academic year, of a full-time course. In the further education system, loans will apply to all provision at Levels 3 and 4 for those aged 24 and over, including access to higher education courses as well as advanced and higher-level apprenticeships.

The model for the further education loans system was the subject of a specific consultation which closed in October 2011 (BIS 2011e). In reviewing responses to the consultation, the reform plan noted concerns about the willingness of students in further education to take-up such loans.

> *Many responses emphasised the contrast between a "typical" FE learner and a "typical" HE learner, and said that learners in FE might be less likely to take out a loan. Of course, we acknowledge that FE supports more students facing single or multiple disadvantages, and that many will require additional financial support to help them participate. We will therefore continue to consolidate funding streams so that colleges and training providers have maximum flexibility to respond. (BIS 2011d, p. 25)*

Reservations were also expressed among employers:

> *Some employers of apprentices have raised concerns about asking their employees to take out a loan. We believe that a clear understanding by everyone involved of how the cost of a loan balances against the benefits of an Apprenticeship to the individual as well as to their employer will help to allay these fears. We are also exploring how employers can take on greater ownership of loans. (ibid)*

On its side, the White Paper on higher education saw the new funding arrangements offering 'a chance of a new partnership' between employer, student and institution.

> *Employers may help to meet a student's tuition costs in return for a commitment from the institution to align course content to their specific needs … Smaller firms within a sector or sub-sector may wish to work together to achieve leverage and economies of scale. (BIS 2011c, p. 41)*

Furthermore, bespoke programmes ('closed courses') for employers did not come within current entrant controls. Where employers meet all the costs, the Government will exclude them from any number controls. This will ensure that there are 'no Government-imposed limits on the expansion of this employer-supported provision'. Any such flexibility would need to meet three principles: fair access for all students regardless of ability to pay; places must be genuinely additional; and there must be no reduction in academic entry standards in recruitment. In the White Paper, such arrangements seem to have universities in mind rather than FECs:

> *This means that there is no question of individual students being able to purchase a place at a higher education institution – the admissions system will continue to take into account only a student's ability to learn, not their ability to pay (ibid., p. 51)*

On the other hand, it was the same White Paper that highlighted the value of access to higher education courses funded by the Skills Funding Agency. Targeted at groups under-represented in higher education and developed by local further and higher education institutions working in partnership, the Government will examine 'opportunities to develop even more flexible routes for progression from further to higher education, including work-based options'.

In another boundary turn, it is in the reform plan for the further education system that the Government announced its intention to develop the concept and practice of 'higher vocational education' to both embrace the diversity of higher-level qualifications offered by FECs and to promote progression within and between providers in the further and higher education sectors.

> *Whilst many colleges and providers have long and established records in offering Level 4 technical and professional qualifications, this has been a neglected area in policy terms for some time, particularly around what has become known as 'non-prescribed higher education'. We will develop and promote the concept, identity and value of our 'Higher Vocational Education' portfolio with clear, flexible and articulated progression routes into Levels 4, 5 and 6. (BIS 2011d, p. 13)*

The quality and improvement of teaching and learning in vocational higher education will come within the remit of the 'commission on adult education and vocational pedagogy' to be established with support from the Learning and Skills Improvement Service and the Institute for Learning.

In the reform plan, LSIS is asked to lead on work to support FECs in developing 'collaborative approaches' to the delivery of higher education in colleges, including progression pathways from further education to higher education. Further education colleges already provided nearly 40% of new entrants to higher education and the introduction of further education loans is intended to help more adults move from the intermediate to the higher levels and help them 'progress in their careers'. Even so, their progression will need to be supported in 'other ways'.

In a more competitive environment for colleges, universities and other providers, it will be necessary to develop 'innovative business models' to secure effective progression for students and share the associated risks. The Government will invite collaborative proposals to increase credit accumulation and transfer opportunities across further and higher education. At the same time, the opening-up of awarding powers to national organisations is expected to take into account the need for 'seamless and navigable pathways for our students and employers on an all-England basis'.

Progression routes for apprentices into and through vocational higher education are a particular priority. In The Plan for Growth (HM Treasury and BIS 2011), the Government announced targeted support to help smaller employers benefit from advanced and higher

apprenticeships. The aim is to create at least 10,000 higher apprenticeship places over four years. In June, 2011 the National Apprenticeship Service invited organisations, including colleges, to bid for support from the Higher Apprenticeship Fund (NAS 2011). The outcomes were announced in the following December. A second round of bidding opened in February 2012.

In October 2011, four months after publication of the White Paper on higher education, FECs and HEIs eligible to apply for student numbers from the margin were invited to bid for a share of around 20,000 places in 2012-13 (HEFCE 2011e). In this year, applications could only be made for full-time undergraduate places fundable by HEFCE. Institutions could bid for a minimum of 25 new entrant places. There was no maximum, although institutions were informed that bids should not increase entrant numbers (whether currently directly or indirectly funded) by more than 20%.

Creating a margin of 20,000 students approximated to an average reduction of 8% to the student number control of all institutions with an access agreement with the Office for Fair Access. At the stage of consultation on the core and margin proposals in June 2011, FECs intending to charge tuition fees at or below £6000 – thereby not requiring them to have an access agreement – were to be 'protected' from any pro-rata reduction in student numbers to create this margin. This was because they would be 'meeting the Government's aim of delivering lower fee provision'. When implemented, no institution was automatically exempt, although some establishments specialising in the performing and creative arts were able if they wished to opt out of both the AAB+ and core-margin processes. A full summary of the responses to the consultation and the decisions subsequently made by HEFCE were published in November 2011 (HEFCE 2011g).

A total of 202 bids were received by HEFCE for 35,811 'margin' places by the deadline of November 2011. Of these, 167 bids were from further education colleges and 34 bids from higher education institutions. One application was received from 'another' publicly funded provider of higher education. Bids were judged by a panel that included external representatives from the HE and FE sectors. Assessment of proposals was against the criteria of demand, quality and average fee. The outcomes of applications were made known to individual institutions in January 2012. The final institutional allocations were announced by HEFCE in March 2012 (HEFCE 2012a). In the same month, HEFCE opened its consultation on student number controls and teaching funding for 2013-14 and beyond (HEFCE 2012b).

Prior to publication of the White Paper, many institutions had already announced their fees for 2012-13. Most had set fees closer to £9000 than the £6000 threshold. To encourage establishments to come below the £7500 average fee and enable them to bid for places from the margin, they were permitted to revise their access agreements. Similarly, institutions that did not currently have an access agreement with OFFA were able to submit one.

Twenty-four universities and three FECs took advantage of this opportunity. OFFA also received new access agreements from seven FECs. On analysis, revised agreements submitted by two of the 27 institutions were found to be outside the core and margin proposals. In December 2011, OFFA announced its approval of 25 revised access agreements (including one from a further education college) and ten new access agreements (all from FECs).

The HEIs and FECs that revised their access agreements were required to inform all affected applicants of any changes to their fees or financial support. This gave applicants who were disappointed with the changed 'package' the opportunity to apply elsewhere before the January deadline for applications to UCAS.

This account of the policy measures, processes and deadlines bearing on the higher education in further education colleges is an indication of the intensity of reform and change since 2010. Many elements of these policies were announced and introduced during the course of the research. In the second part of this chapter, the timeframe is longer in order to highlight key features in the development of higher education in FECs, especially those most likely to influence how colleges fare in this new environment.

2.2 History and policy

The involvement of colleges in higher education is long-standing (Scott 2009). Some trace their higher-level work back to the 1950s or earlier. Others came into higher education for the first time during the rapid and dramatic expansion at the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s. Although the polytechnics and other large providers of higher education were removed from local government in 1988, the higher education that remained with further education colleges was 'substantial and diverse' (DES 1989). Its 120,000 students studied mainly part-time for short-cycle vocational qualifications, such as the HNC, HND and a range of higher-level technical and professional qualifications. During the expansion years these numbers grew to around 146,000 (Parry 2003).

However, these did not include the higher education students taught by colleges on behalf of some of the fastest-growing polytechnics. When expansion was brought to a halt in 1994, it was estimated that over 30,000 students were taught on franchised or collaborative programmes in further education institutions (HEFCE 1995). Apart from relieving their capacity constraints and enabling them to continue to grow their numbers, the polytechnics were able to target many of their courses at the local and regional populations served by partner colleges. In turn, franchising offered colleges a welcome source of additional funding; it offered further education students enhanced opportunities to study for higher education; and the stimulus and status of higher-level teaching was attractive to college staff (Abramson, Bird and Stennett 1996).

If the estimate of franchised numbers is added to the higher education students registered at colleges, then around 176,000 students were taught in the further education sector. By the turn of the century, this total had increased to approximately 187,000 (Parry 2005a). Today, this figure is in the region of 177,000 or roughly one in twelve of the higher education population in England.

The colleges also equipped large numbers of young people and adults with the qualifications for entry to undergraduate education. Some of those choosing not to study at a polytechnic or university might remain in the college to do their higher education but, as now, internal progression was usually much smaller than transfer to a higher education institution.

A major difference between the expansion years up to 1994 and the resumption of growth soon after was the extent to which higher education in colleges was a policy actively favoured by government (Parry and Thompson 2002). As a result of legislation in 1988

and 1992, a two-sector tertiary system was founded on the assumption that institutions allocated to the further education sector should be chiefly or solely concerned with teaching at levels below higher education. In the second period, from the late1990s onwards, that policy presumption was reversed or at least heavily qualified by government efforts to expand higher education in the college sector. The two-sector architecture built during the first period was retained for the second. It is within this framework that the current reform programmes in higher and further education are being implemented.

The recommendations of the Dearing inquiry (1996-97) to resume growth in higher education and charge tuition fees were accompanied by specific proposals inviting FECs to play a leading role in the expansion of undergraduate education. The inquiry report expected that a growing part of future demand would be expressed at the sub-Bachelor levels. It was proposed that FECs be accorded a 'special mission' for the teaching of undergraduate qualifications below the Bachelor's Degree (NCIHE 1997). Over time, colleges were expected to become the main providers of these qualifications. For this mission, they were to be funded directly by HEFCE. The inquiry viewed indirect funding relationships, especially those involving more than partner, as a potential threat to standards. Franchising had also brought Bachelors' level teaching to some colleges for the first time. The Dearing mission for FECs was intended to curtail any such upward academic drift.

Since 1997, the teaching of higher education in college settings has been a major element in policies aimed at securing increased growth, broader participation, greater diversity and more work-focused forms of higher education. Although a larger role for colleges was accepted, the measures proposed by Dearing were not adopted. Under the Blair and Brown Governments, indirect funding became the preferred model and FECs took advantage of opportunities to provide teaching at the Bachelors' level. Instead of a special mission, colleges were encouraged to collaborate as well as compete with universities in the drive to expansion.

With little evidence of increased demand, ministers came to doubt the capacity of existing forms of sub-Bachelor provision to generate further significant expansion. In order to meet its 50% participation target, the Blair Government launched a new short-cycle qualification, the Foundation Degree. By involving employers in its design and operation, by enabling students to apply their learning to specific workplace situations, and by guaranteeing arrangements for progression to the Bachelor's Degree, the new qualification was intended to tackle the historic 'skills deficit' at the intermediate levels. The new degree was expected to be 'delivered' typically (but never exclusively) by FECs.

2.2.1 HEFCE review and request for strategies

As the main funder of higher education in FECs, HEFCE was responsible for its policy development and monitoring. In 2005, it began a review of this activity in light of the changes to funding, fees and student support that followed the White Paper on higher education in 2003 (DfES 2003). The White Paper reaffirmed the 'important role' of colleges in higher education.

> *Further education has strengths in providing ladders of progression for students, particularly for those pursuing vocational routes, and serves the needs of part-time students and those who want to study locally. Further education colleges make an important contribution to meeting local and regional skills*

> *needs, including the higher education they provide. We want this significant role to continue and to grow.' (DfES 2003, p. 62)*

As the HEFCE review acknowledged, college-based higher education was already 'a distinctive part' of the higher education system:

> *While it is dangerous to over-generalise about a diverse system, HE students in FECs are more likely to be over 25, more likely to study part-time, and more likely to come from areas with low rates of participation in HE than students in HEIs. They are more likely to be studying foundation degrees and sub-degree programmes such as HNCs and HNDs.*
>
> *These distinctive features derive from the particular place that FECs occupy in their communities and the nature of the FE curriculum on which HE provision is often based. They lie in the extent to which FECs' focus on short-cycle HE enables them to offer more higher level learning within a context of lifelong learning, to respond swiftly to skills needs, to deliver programmes flexibly, and to work effectively within a turbulent market. (HEFCE 2006, p. 9)*

In addition to addressing frequent complaints from colleges about insecurity, uncertainty and lack of clarity in indirect funding arrangements, the review wanted to understand why growth had been so hard to achieve: 'The volume has at best remained static and may be declining' and 'we do not know why this is'.

There were concerns as well about small and isolated pockets of provision. At the time of the review, higher education in the further education sector was unevenly distributed across close to 300 FECs, with 50 to 60 colleges accounting for half the population of higher education students. At one end were colleges with more than 1,000 students. At the other were establishments with less than 100 students.

The review concluded that some colleges had been insufficiently strategic in managing and planning their higher education. Accordingly, all FECs in receipt of HEFCE funding were required to provide a strategy statement justifying their involvement in higher education and explaining how it related to other provision locally or regionally; how it managed relationships with other higher education providers; and how it built on strengths in their further education provision. Furthermore, the strategy was to take account of non-HEFCE funded provision as well. Strategies were requested in 2009 for submission in early 2010 (HEFCE 2009b). These were received from 240 of the 256 colleges funded directly and indirectly by HEFCE.

The other major outcome of the HEFCE review was that colleges with indirectly funded provision should have a minimum period (three years) of security for the funding and student numbers available to them by partner HEIs, so that they have 'more opportunity for long-term strategic investment in HE' (HEFCE 2006). Alongside this were proposals to encourage transparency in funding agreements and the services to be provided by HEIs and colleges. When implemented, these measures were soon overtaken by the introduction of student number control from 2009-10. It was not until 2011 that an analysis of the strategy statements was published and this was based on a sample of 90 submissions (HEFCE 2011a).

2.2.2 Increasing access and widening participation

Separate from the HEFCE review but researching some of the same questions, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) supported a two-year study (2006-08) of the impact of 'dual regimes' of further and higher education on efforts to increase and widen participation in English undergraduate education (ESRC 2008). This included investigation of the rationale for a two-sector division; its influence on how further and higher education was combined in 'dual sector' organisations; and how students moved within and between these zones (Bathmaker et al 2008). International and contextual papers were commissioned as part of the research to help identify general and distinctive features in the English situation (Higher Education Quarterly 2009).

The ESRC study highlighted the difficulty of developing consistent and coherent policy for higher education in FECs when responsibility for that policy was vested in one sector and delivery in another. HEFCE did not (and could not) exercise the same responsibility for the overall health and development of FECs as it did for HEIs. That role lay with the then Learning and Skills Council (LSC), as the primary funding body. The LSC had no remit for undergraduate education (only for higher-level skills) and, given that higher education was such a small fraction of the activity in the post-16 system, it was under no obligation to consider the fitness or support of colleges for undergraduate education. A similar argument had been made in research commissioned for the Foster inquiry into the future of further education colleges in England (Foster 2005, Parry 2005b). Moreover, rather than a coming together, there was evidence that the two sectors were moving apart in their administrative, funding and quality systems (Stanton 2009).

While there were structural reasons for the slow and uneven development of higher education in the further education sector, the ESRC research also pointed to the specificity of the qualifications (vocational, technical and professional) offered by most colleges and the discrete markets (local and regional) and niches (specialist, occupational, skills-focused) served by their higher education. Notwithstanding issues of size, scope and status, these close relationships with communities, employers and other providers of higher education were unlikely to stimulate or sustain large overall demand. They did however attract a student population that was diverse in age and background. As analyses for the HEFCE review and ESRC study showed, the college contribution to widening access and participation in English higher education was considerable.

This contribution was two-fold: as places where individuals of different ages were able to qualify for entry to higher education on the basis of academic, vocational and access qualifications; and as providers of higher education in their own right or on behalf of partner HEIs. The role of general FECs in performing these qualifying and providing functions was particularly important. They qualified a large proportion of the students from low participation neighbourhoods and less affluent areas who went on to study in higher education. In the higher education they themselves provided, colleges attracted larger proportions of students from low participation neighbourhoods and areas of deprivation than did institutions in the higher education sector (Rashid and Brooks 2008).

2.3 Students, programmes and partnerships

Students studying for higher education and higher-level qualifications are taught in four main types of further education institution. The great majority undertake their higher

education in more than 200 general further education colleges where most students – young people and adults – are pursuing courses of academic, vocational, general and basic education at the further education levels (including some 14 to 16 year-olds taught as a result of partnerships with schools). Smaller numbers of higher education students are taught at 20 or so specialist further education colleges (in areas such as agriculture and horticulture, art and design, and drama and dance) and a tiny number at specialist designated institutions (that provide for the education of adults and include some adult residential colleges). The remainder is found in some of the sixth form colleges which cater mainly 16 to 19 year-olds studying upper secondary qualifications. These establishments joined the further education sector in 1993 and were previously under schools regulations (Rashid et al 2011).

Across these institutions, around 177,000 students study for qualifications at the undergraduate or postgraduate levels, or for other higher-level qualifications at equivalent levels. Of this total, 60 per cent study on a part-time basis. These students are taught across some 283 colleges.

Most students – some 108,000 – are undertaking undergraduate qualifications. At these levels, the largest numbers are pursuing a Foundation Degree (just under one-half), followed by the Bachelor's Degree (near to one-quarter), the HNC (10 per cent) and the HND (13 per cent). A small number are also studying for the DipHE or CertHE. Within the undergraduate levels, the ratio of part-time to full-time is the reverse of that for the whole population of higher education students in colleges, with 60 per cent on full-time programmes.

Another 64,000 are studying for higher-level qualifications (or credits) leading to a variety of vocational, technical and professional qualifications, mostly by part-time study. The majority of the remaining 5,000 students are taking taught postgraduate programmes, with most studying part-time. These (rounded) numbers are taken from the detailed statistics reported in Chapter 3 where the base year for most of the tables is 2009-10. Unless otherwise indicated, the summary data presented in the rest of the present chapter is drawn from these tables.

2.3.1 Types and trends in the pattern of qualifications

Although there is no single time series combining all the types of higher education taught in FECs, it is possible to indicate some recent trends in the pattern of qualifications studied. Most conspicuous is the rise of the Foundation Degree in college undergraduate education and the corresponding eclipse – but by no means elimination – of the HND and the HNC. Prior to the introduction of the Foundation Degree in 2001-02, the two higher national qualifications constituted the dominant provision in colleges at the undergraduate levels (Parry, Davies and Williams 2004). Today, they represent less than one-quarter of the undergraduate population.

The year-on-year expansion of the Foundation Degree in FECs and HEIs enabled the previous Government to achieve its target of 100,000 students by the year 2010. Over 275 FECs were involved in FD provision and, by 2006-07, two-thirds of all full-time entrants and one-half of all part-time entrants were taught in FECs. Although teaching the majority of FD students, just one-quarter were registered at FECs and rest were franchise students registered at HEIs (HEFCE 2010a).

The Foundation Degree is designed as both a free-standing award and a transfer qualification normally giving progression to the final year or stage of a Bachelor's Degree. The HND – and to a lesser extent the HNC – also function increasingly as transfer qualifications. Below the Bachelor's Degree, most analyses of completion and progression are focused on the Foundation Degree and these are only for students registered at HEIs. Given that nearly all FDs have linked or guaranteed progression pathways to Bachelors' Degrees, the rates of transfer for franchise students taught in FECs are probably not dissimilar to the total for all students registered at HEIs. In 2007-08, around three in five full-time and two in five part-time qualifiers went on to study a Bachelor's programme in the following year.

A second recent trend in the pattern of higher education in FECs is the extension of indirect funding partnerships to embrace the great majority of FECs and most HEIs. Collaboration between institutions in the two sectors has a long history, enabling students to move from Level 3 programmes into undergraduate education and between the different levels of higher education. When the 2003 White Paper on higher education declared its preference for funding higher education in colleges indirectly, 'structured partnerships' were to be the primary vehicles by which colleges could grow their higher education and by which students – especially those pursuing vocational routes and wanting to study locally – could take advantage of 'ladders of progression. Such partnerships would ensure that any expanded provision was 'of the high quality that we expect from higher education' and where the name and presence of the university would help to stimulate demand for college-based higher education (DfES 2003).

At present, some 245 colleges have indirect funding relationships with HEIs. The majority have partnerships with one or two HEIs but some colleges have between three and six, and one college has eight. A total of 68 HEIs funded colleges indirectly for one or more courses of higher education. Given their long involvement with colleges, most of these are post-1992 universities and their partnerships with individual colleges often span a range of provision. That said, 20 pre-1992 universities and three other types of higher education institutions are also in funding partnerships with FECs. Many of these 68 HEIs also collaborate with directly funded colleges for the validation and award of their undergraduate qualifications.

A third trend is the decline in the numbers studying for non-prescribed qualifications, although the scale of this reduction is difficult to estimate. One policy reason for this drop was the inclusion after 1999 of the HNC in the list of prescribed courses able to be funded by HEFCE. Before that, the HNC was part of the non-prescribed provision supported by the Learning and Skills Council (and by its predecessor, the Further Education Funding Council). Following the transfer of funding responsibility for the HNC to HEFCE, there were still over 70,000 students aiming for higher-level qualifications in the further education sector (Clark 2002). Today, there are probably somewhere between 50,000 and 65,000 students in this category.

2.3.2 LSC responsibility and strategy

The 2011 reform plan for further education acknowledged that non-prescribed higher education had been a neglected area of policy. This was despite the LSC declaring its own strategy for higher education (LSC 2006). As 'an active and influential strategic partner across the HE landscape', the intention was to 'prioritise HE as an important consideration in planning dialogues'. Aware that there was '*no coherent, up-to-date overview of the*

subject', the LSC commissioned a study to better understand the higher-level provision it funded (LSC 2008). The report recognised two basic types of non-prescribed provision: national vocational qualifications (NVQs); and professional and technical qualifications awarded by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. Among the professional bodies, a number were dominant, most notably the Association of Accounting Technicians and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Funding by the LSC for non-prescribed higher education was discretionary and this had led to variations in funding in local LSC areas. On some occasions, the funding was withdrawn at short notice in response to pressures on the overall budget. There was a particularly concern that:

> *many colleges immediately cancel provision in response to funding cuts, instead of attempting full-cost recovery, even though it seems that full-cost provision attracts at least as many enrolments as subsidised provision. (LSC 2008, p. 5)*

The withdrawal of provision was viewed with dismay by some professional bodies since this was '*an important source of social mobility and economic benefit'* and offered '*alternative progression routes into the professions'*.

Since then, there has been renewed interest in non-prescribed higher education as a route for higher apprenticeships and as a pathway into higher education for advanced level apprentices (HEFCE 2009a). From 100 higher apprenticeships reported in 2005-06, the number had grown to 1,700 in 2009-10. The small numbers and proportions of advanced level apprentices moving into higher education have attracted similar attention. The majority are studying at levels below the Bachelor's Degree and those undertaking advanced level apprenticeships in FECs are just as likely to progress to non-prescribed higher education as to provision funded by HEFCE (Smith and Joslin 2011).

Partnerships to advance vocational and workplace progression into and through higher education were the impetus for lifelong learning networks (LLNs). Operating across a city, area, region or subject, and combining the strengths of a number of diverse institutions, these networks of (mainly) higher and further education providers were expected to bring greater clarity, coherence and certainty to progression opportunities for vocational students (HEFCE 2004). As with Foundation Degrees, the LLNs were established with funding for development and additional student numbers. Along with indirect funding relationships, LLNs were the latest in a line of measures that marked the rise of 'semi-compulsory partnerships' between providers in the two sectors (Parry, Thompson and Blackie 2006). A summative evaluation of the LLN programme concluded that it had led to the development of new curricula (often involving employers) and new progression agreements (commonly between colleges and universities), with close to 20,000 students expected progress along these routes (HEFCE 2010b).

Rather less attention has been given to the admission arrangements for higher education in colleges and less is known about the majority who apply direct to FECs than those who make applications through the UCAS system. According to UCAS data, over one-half of the applicants to colleges make a single choice of institution, over two-thirds of those accepted live within 25 miles of their chosen college, and at least four out of five enter with qualifications other than A-Levels (SPA 2012). These echo the findings of an online survey

in 2010 of over 800 students – full-time and part-time – undertaken by the Mixed Economy Group of colleges (MEG 2010). The choice to study locally at a college was a positive one although, for part-time students, it was often also a course and institution specified by the employer (Hudson and Berzins 2011).

The admission arrangements made by colleges themselves feature in review reports by the QAA on the quality of the learning opportunities offered to students.

> *In general, admissions arrangements are handled well. The majority of colleges recruit through a central operation, although this is often reinforced by helpful contributions from subject staff. The reviews confirm that retention is enhanced where central services and subject staff work cooperatively during the admissions stages. (QAA 2006, p. 17)*

2.3.3 Colleges and employer engagement

The vocational orientation and traditions of the further education system have seen colleges in relationships with employers throughout their history and across all levels of their education and training. Support from organisations for their employees to attend courses of higher education in colleges is equally long-established, with employers meeting some or all of the costs of tuition or contributing in other ways. Collaboration in the design and running of programmes together with provision of work placements are other long-standing features of employer support for college-based higher education.

Employer engagement is now central to government policies on education, skills and workforce development. Even so, the nature of these involvements, even in the present period, are among the least researched and reported parts of further education.

For a present-day picture of this activity, it is necessary to draw on the literature of organisations such as Foundation Degree Forward and the Council for Industry and Higher Education, much of it in the form of case studies and associated commentaries. In these documents, relationships between colleges and employers are rarely considered separately from relationships with other providers. Where employer engagement with colleges is in focus, as in the reports of QAA reviews on higher education in FECs, it is just one among a number of dimensions from which illustrations are drawn to highlight good practice. Beyond these sources, reliance has to be made on various guides and directories on collaborative working and work-based learning.

Although employers have involvements with both colleges and HEIs for the recruitment of workers with higher education qualifications and for the continuing professional development of their workforce, there is little independent or systematic research comparing these activities and relationships. Nor is there an evidence base for the views and valuations of employers on their engagement with higher education in both sectors.

In the HEFCE review of college-taught higher education, the ability of colleges to ‘respond swiftly to skills needs’, ‘deliver programmes flexibly’ and provide for the higher-level training sought by employers were described as a particular strength (HEFCE 2006). The Foster report on the future role of FECs concluded that there was a need for general further education colleges to rediscover their core purpose of building vocational skills for the economy, a tradition which (it was claimed) had been diluted in recent years.

> *A focus on vocational skills building is not a residual choice but a vital building block in the UK's platform for future prosperity. It gives FE colleges an unequivocal mission and the basis of a renewed and powerful brand image. (Foster 2005, p.16)*

A primary focus on skills would not exclude or invalidate the other 'pillars' of social inclusion and academic progress. On the contrary, an emphasis on skills would itself 'turn out to be a huge driver' for widening participation and improved personal self-esteem. It was at the higher levels in particular that FECs had a central role in the renewal and replenishment of skills.

Significantly, the 2006 White Paper on further education went much further than the Foster review in suggesting not only that the college role in higher education will 'continue to grow in importance' but that this should be linked to both the economic 'and' social mission of colleges. All the same, 'there should be a presumption that HE delivered in FE should have a strong occupational and employment purpose' and the flagship qualification for this was to be the Foundation Degree: 'designed and delivered in partnership with employers' and giving 'a strong foundation for employment in a chosen sector' (DfES 2006, p.30).

A review of the literature on Foundation Degrees highlighted the role of colleges as partners with HEIs and employers in this collaborative enterprise. Collaboration between FECs and HEIs was 'complex' and 'problems derived from different cultures, different forms of pedagogy, and levels of resourcing and status issues'. On the employer side, time constraints (real and perceived) were 'major inhibiting factors' for their involvement and employers 'faced expense when workers are taken out of the workplace to attend taught study days'. The literature warned that 'employer situations change' and that good intentions 'can evaporate in changing business climates or as a result of changing policy or financial constraints'. If possible, it was sensible to 'piggy-back' on other long-term initiatives or relationships that already exist between employers and different parts of the college or university (Harvey 2009).

It was also envisaged that new kinds of employer-led and work-based higher education would be developed within the Train to Gain framework, with FECs being able to offer integrated training programmes for, and co-financed with, employers. Employer co-funded provision was later a responsibility of HEFCE, with additional student numbers available to FECs and HEIs on this basis. Improved responsiveness to local and regional employer needs and the development of work-based learning programmes in partnership with employers were among the key objectives for the recognition of 'centres of higher education excellence' in FECs.

These were an echo of the centres of vocational excellence which all general further education colleges were expected to develop. By 2005, over half of these colleges had established at least one vocational specialism for which they were regarded as a centre of excellence locally, regionally or nationally. Always conditional upon resources made available to HEFCE, the scheme for centres of higher education excellence was not pursued due to mounting pressures on funding.

2.4 Funding, teaching and staffing

The introduction of tuition fees for full-time undergraduate education in 1998-99 was a response to an earlier crisis of funding in higher education. From 2006, variable fees up to £3,000 were able to be charged by HEIs and FECs for these same courses. Although some colleges set fees below £3,000 for some or all of their directly funded programmes, and partner HEIs normally set the fee levels of their franchised courses, the nature and role of fee-setting by FECs in the new regulated market was not systematically investigated and monitored. All institutions intending to charge higher fees were required to set these out in an access agreement to OFFA. In the event, nearly all HEIs and many FECs charged the maximum fee, with a very small amount of full-time undergraduate education priced under £3,000. Apart from surveys by the AoC of fee-setting by its member institutions, relatively little attention was paid to fee differentiation from this quarter. Of more concern to colleges was their access to public funding and student numbers.

Matters and issues of public funding have a special significance for higher education in colleges. This is because of separate funding sources and methodologies for different categories of courses and, to an extent not found elsewhere in higher education, the use of indirect funding to underpin the teaching of a significant portion of undergraduate education. Both the definition of courses for public funding and the conduct of franchising have been, at various points, queried or criticised by FECs and their representative groups.

The ability of colleges to be funded for higher education and by whom is set out in the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act and related statutory instruments. The legislation gave funding powers to HEFCE for higher education in HEIs and FECs. Unlike for HEIs, where its powers and responsibilities are wider, HEFCE is only able to fund FECs directly for prescribed courses of higher education. The courses and qualifications that come into this category include higher degrees and postgraduate diplomas, Bachelors' and Foundation Degrees, HNDs and HNCs, and DipHEs and CertHEs. As already noted, HNCs were included in the prescribed category after 1999. Previously, they were the funding responsibility of the Further Education Funding Council. Under the 1992 Act, the FEFC had the power to fund higher education that was outside the prescribed list of courses. This power is now exercised by the Skills Funding Agency.

When that power rested with the LSC, the two major issues for colleges were the low priority accorded to this provision and the insecurity of this source of funding. Shortly before the announcement of its abolition in 2008, the LSC indicated its intention to address these matters. On the funding powers given to HEFCE, one of the main issues for colleges was their inability to be funded directly for individual modules, only for courses leading to 'the whole qualification'. In seeking to clarify the position (HEFCE 2008), the funding council also highlighted the difference in its funding powers for HEIs and for FECs, including the anomaly of colleges being able to be funded for the teaching of modules under a franchise agreement with an HEI. The shift away from direct funding and the preference for franchising remained (and continued to be) the bigger concerns for FECs.

2.4.1 Routes and rates of funding and the costs of provision

As a result of HNCs being redefined as prescribed higher education, HEFCE became responsible for the funding a larger number of colleges and their undergraduate students.

Ahead of this change, and contrary to the Dearing recommendation for direct funding, colleges were offered a choice between three funding options, but with a strong steer in favour of collaborative arrangements 'which best support quality and standards' (HEFCE 1998a). There three options were: direct funding; indirect funding (franchising); and funding through a consortium of colleges and HEIs. Colleges were able, if they wished, to continue with multiple funding routes. Nevertheless, it would 'normally make sense' for a college to choose a single funding route for all its provision, if only to 'avoid unnecessary complexity'.

The transfer of funding responsibility for HNCs to HEFCE also required a better understanding of the cost of provision in FECs, relative to provision made by HEIs; and before a decision could be made on whether colleges should be funded at the same rate, or at a reduced rate to reflect lower average costs. Following a study (HEFCE 1998b) comparing the cost structures of similar provision in FECs and HEIs which demonstrated that costs were not significantly different for HNDs and Bachelors' Degrees in business studies (the subject constituting a large proportion of higher education in FECs), it was decided to fund this provision at a rate similar to that in HEIs. This was in accord with 'the key principle of our teaching method' that 'similar activities should be funded at similar rates'. After allocating their provision to the appropriate price groups, all colleges were then expected to migrate to within 5% (above or below) of their standard rate of funding over a period of three years.

As a consequence of some colleges choosing to be funded indirectly or through consortia, the total number of colleges receiving funds directly from HEFCE reduced from a high of 270 in 1999-00 to 202 by 2001-02. By the end of 2001, seven consortia were recognised by HEFCE for funding purposes. Franchising and consortia arrangements (both regarded as indirectly funded partnerships) were the subject of codes of practice setting out guidance on the principles that should be reflected in their funding agreements (HEFCE 2000).

The indirect funding agreements between HEIs and FECs were the property of institutions and, except for consortia, there was no requirement for HEFCE to see them. Colleges had become increasingly concerned about the level of the 'top-slice' retained by HEIs for their quality assurance and awarding services, especially how this was calculated, what specific activities it funded, and why there appeared to be considerable variation between HEIs and FECs in the amount or percentage taken.

An early study of the nature of higher and further education sub-contractual partnerships described them as a 'complex set of variations on a single theme' but which resulted nevertheless in 'significant variations in the actual funding being received by FECs' (HEFCE 1998b). A later review of indirect funding agreements and arrangements also undertaken for HEFCE reported 'substantial' variation in top-slicing levels, with FECs reporting figures ranging from 8% to 50% and HEIs from 3% to 42%. Most were in the region of 20% to 30% but it was still difficult to know what was included. Those for consortia appeared to be much lower. Some colleges did not know how much was charged and, if they did, some did not know what proportion of the total that represented. Among HEIs there was a widespread consensus that costing partnerships was 'an extremely difficult business' and that, whatever the methodology (or lack of it), the majority believed that the overhead did not cover the full costs of the activities and services performed (HEFCE 2003a).

Colleges had often asked HEFCE to specify the proportion that should be taken. In the HEFCE review in 2005-06, the response to this question was to encourage institutions to know their own costs of teaching activities and to 'use these in a transparent way' to derive the costs of the services involved. By this time, the recommendations of the 2003 White Paper in favour of indirect funding had been implemented. Since then, colleges have continued to argue for direct funding to enable them to build more stable, secure and sustainable forms of provision, with a more independent role for colleges in its future development. In the meantime, the conditions for consortia working had become tougher and this model of funding was eventually phased out.

Even before the introduction of student number control from 2009-10, the pressure on additional funded numbers had tightened, with fewer opportunities for colleges to bid for these. One other possibility was co-funded provision with employers. As part of the Government response to the Leitch review of skills (Leitch Review of Skills 2006), HEFCE was asked to develop a new model for funding higher education that was co-financed with employers. Between 2007-08 and 2008-09, four FECs received co-funded numbers under this scheme (HEFCE 2011b).

Outside of undergraduate education, the costs of programmes supported by the SFA have received even less attention, although an LSC-funded study felt able to conclude that the provision of higher-level courses in FECs 'does not appear to be significantly cheaper than higher education institutions, on account of the greater number of contact hours with teachers and smaller class sizes timetabled by FE colleges' (LSC 2008). The fees charged for higher-level qualifications, some of which is full-cost provision, is also under-reported. Unregulated fees for taught postgraduate and part-time undergraduate students in HEIs and FECs have been surveyed by HEFCE on an occasional basis indicating that colleges charge at a lower level than either multi-faculty HEIs or specialist institutions (HEFCE 2003d, 2009d).

2.4.2 Teaching, staffing and scholarly activity

In contrast to HEIs which are funded for both teaching and research, further education colleges are essentially teaching-only establishments, with most of their funding keyed to provision at Levels 3, 2, 1 and Entry Level. Where, up to 2012-13, HEIs have received most of their funding for teaching as part of a block grant, colleges draw on a number of funding streams to support provision in different areas of education and training. Their funding from the SFA for higher-level qualifications is apportioned in this manner. Their direct funding from HEFCE for courses of undergraduate education is against targeted (now controlled) student numbers. Their indirect funding from HEFCE is against the student numbers allocated to them by partner HEIs.

Along with funding from HEFCE went an expectation that colleges will 'deliver the same quality and standards of higher education as HEIs' and an appreciation that this might be achieved in different ways.

> *The quality of the student experience should not vary. The content, method and approach of programmes may differ: FECs, for example, tend to adopt a more supportive and intensive teaching style than many HEIs. Such differences are legitimate and desirable, in order to reflect the different needs, abilities and circumstances of students. (HEFCE 1999, p. 2)*

Colleges do this in settings where the numbers pursuing higher education qualifications are smaller – often very much smaller – than the population of students studying at the further education levels. Scale, along with subject and specialism, will be important factors in how provision for higher education is organised, managed and taught in colleges. These take a variety of organisational forms and shapes, with no one configuration dominant. At one end of a spectrum are educational and social spaces dedicated exclusively to higher education students and their teaching, such as in separate campuses, buildings and parts of premises. At the other end are spaces, facilities and resources shared between higher and further education students, sometimes with the intention of reinforcing the progression pathways available within subject and occupational areas.

Even when provision is brought together in a higher education centre, it is not uncommon to find courses of non-prescribed higher education taught and managed in other departments or sections of the college. In some cases, this provision might not be recognised as higher education, even though its qualifications are described as Level 4 and above.

Some of the main sources of information about these and other aspects of teaching and staffing are the good practice guides on higher education in FECs published by HEFCE (HEFCE 2003b, 2003c, 2009c), augmented by periodic surveys and mapping exercises sponsored by the sector organisations. These works are particularly important in understanding the conditions of teaching and forms of scholarly activity represented in these settings and how, in broad terms, they compare with those in HEIs.

Staff who teach higher education courses in FECs usually have longer contact hours than their counterparts in HEIs but the programmes taught in colleges might have more contact hours overall. The size of their classes is mostly smaller than the audiences taught in lecture halls and seminar groups in most universities. Many college lecturers and tutors teach on both higher education and further education courses. An on-line survey in 2010 of more than 3,000 staff involved in teaching, managing and supporting higher education in FECs reported that while one-quarter spent less that 10% of their time on higher education programmes around one in six had higher education as their exclusive concern. Whether they taught mainly at the higher or further education levels, Foundation Degrees were prominent in their work at the undergraduate levels (MEG 2010).

The same survey noted the broad range of professional development activities undertaken by staff which was specifically addressed to their higher education teaching. This was mostly concerned with subject and vocational updating but the use of assessment also figured large (probably because of its significance in QAA review processes). Of the activities directed at the improvement of teaching and learning, most staff had participated in peer observation and some had taken part in work shadowing. While the college was the main context for continuing professional development in relation to their higher education work, the support received from employers and the opportunities provided by partner HEIs were also important (and valued). Nevertheless, much of this was described as ad hoc.

With a teaching contract usually for 800 or more hours a year and with generally less administrative support than in HEIs, such workloads allowed little time for scholarship or research. Although there were few explicit policies, there was general agreement that members of staff devoting a substantial amount of time to higher education programmes

should be qualified at least to the level above that which they were teaching. The main exception here was tutors who had a considerable amount of relevant and recent industrial experience. Indeed, part-time staff were frequently recruited specifically because they were current or recent practitioners in a particular vocational area. In some areas, colleges found it increasingly difficult to recruit appropriately qualified or experienced staff, especially where HEIs offered better salaries and conditions.

In planning their higher education provision, HEFCE expected all colleges to ensure that staff were appropriately qualified, had opportunities for 'scholarly activity' and were supported by adequate learning resources. No definition was offered of scholarly activity but, in general terms, it is taken to cover any or all of the following: keeping up-to-date with the subject; curriculum development involving research; studying for postgraduate and higher degrees; providing consultancy to industry and other organisations; undertaking industrial secondments or work shadowing; pursuing disciplinary, pedagogic and practitioner research; and leading staff development events. In a few colleges, research is undertaken in specialist fields and the development of a research culture is a related strategic objective.

To assist lecturers and managers develop their scholarly activity, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has assembled a set of resources to support continuing professional development. Included in this are discussion and review papers (Widdowson 2003, Jones 2006, King and Widdowson 2010) as well as links to research toolkits and bibliographies. Like other staff in FECs, those teaching higher education programmes need to remain in good standing with the Institute for Learning and commit to at least 30 hours of continuing professional development per year. This activity can also be counted for recognition at one of the four fellowship categories of the HEA.

Opportunities to enhance their expertise and build a professional identity as college teachers of higher education were welcomed but workload levels and patterns made this difficult.

> *HE-related staff development and the time allocated to it also pose a challenge for many college senior managers. Most staff reported that their class contact hours and programme administration left little time for them to keep abreast of subject developments and that this made it difficult for them to keep up to date with knowledge of current activities and trends essential for students to progress, either within HE or in employment. (QAA 2006, p. 2)*

2.5 Quality, standards and the higher education experience

Responsibility for the review and reporting of the quality of higher education taught in colleges is a function of how it is funded. That funded directly or indirectly by HEFCE (prescribed higher education) is reviewed by the QAA. That funded by the SFA (non-prescribed higher education) is able to be inspected by Ofsted. The satisfaction of students with their courses of higher education, as reported in the National Student Survey (NSS), only applies to undergraduate education funded by HEFCE. Since 2008, colleges with directly funded undergraduate education have participated in the survey.

The QAA uses a method of institutional audit in respect of HEIs and a method of Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) for FECs. Both processes are

concerned with how well academic standards and quality are managed and maintained in these institutions. The outcomes of institutional audit and IQER are published by the QAA for each HEI and college. In addition, the evidence from individual IQER reports is collected and summarised in a series of thematic papers.

Under the common inspection framework for further education and skills, Ofsted inspects a range of types of provision offered by FECs, most of which is at levels below higher education. Where colleges also teach courses leading higher education and higher-level qualifications, the bulk of this provision is funded by HEFCE and reviewed by the QAA. Unlike for IQER, the general inspection of colleges by Ofsted does not lead to routine and separate scrutiny of non-prescribed higher education. Depending on the areas selected for examination, these courses may or may not come within areas chosen for scrutiny during a college inspection.

In the absence of comprehensive coverage and systematic reporting on non-prescribed higher education, the evidence reviewed in this chapter is for the outcomes of IQER and its predecessor, academic review. The ratings of college students in the NSS are also summarised. Before that, the ability of colleges to award their own degrees is considered.

2.5.1 Colleges and the power to award degrees

Apart from IQER, colleges come under the requirements and procedures of the QAA in two other main ways. One is in relation to the national recognition arrangements for access to higher education courses. As the chief providers of these programmes, most colleges submit their access courses for validation by agencies approved by the QAA to carry out this function. The second is in respect of degree-awarding powers.

Before 2011, no institution in the further education sector had the power to award its own degrees. In that year, two further education colleges were granted powers to award Foundation Degrees. Passed in 2007, the legislation enabling colleges to apply for powers to award FDs followed successful lobbying of ministers by college organisations. Before making an application, colleges were expected to have completed their IQER. After submission of a critical self-analysis and supporting quantitative and qualitative evidence, the application process included a series of visits by a scrutiny team. If approved, Foundation Degree-awarding powers are for a fixed term of six years (BIS 2011a).

The 2007 legislation did not change the criteria for general taught degree-awarding powers. Colleges have long been eligible to apply for taught degree-awarding powers but few came close to meeting the initial requirements: at least four years consecutive experience of delivery of higher education programmes at Level 6 (Bachelor's Degree with honours); and half the majority of their higher education students enrolled on study programmes at Level 6. For publicly-funded institutions in the higher education sector these powers are awarded on an indefinite basis (BIS 2011b).

At present, there is one college under consideration for taught degree awarding-powers and a small number of other FECs have had made applications for Foundation Degree-awarding powers. Therefore, nearly all colleges are dependent on degree-awarding HEIs and other awarding organisations (such as Edexcel for higher national qualifications) for the validation of their higher education programmes. In a franchise relationship with a partner HEI, the funding, validating and awarding functions are all combined. Charges for

validation vary and colleges will chose and, if necessary, change their validation partners on the basis of price and the range and quality of the services provided.

2.5.2 Colleges and the outcomes of QAA review

Prior to the introduction of IQER in 2007-08, the review of direct and indirectly funded provision was separate. Directly funded courses were reviewed through the college whereas indirectly funded programmes were reviewed through the partner HEI. Between 2002 and 2007, the QAA conducted 310 reviews in 232 colleges across 20 different subjects. The reviewers had 'confidence' in the standards of around 94% of the provision. Five per cent of reviews resulted in a judgement of 'limited confidence'. Judgements were also made on the quality and effectiveness of learning opportunities. The quality of learning opportunities was found to be 'commendable' or 'approved' in 98% of reviews and 1% of reviews resulted in a 'failing' judgement for all or part of the provision (QAA 2009).

The QAA published an overview of the findings of reviews in this cycle and concluded that, in general, the reviewers found quality assurance and enhancement systems to be strong and effective. There had been increased engagement with, and use of, the 'academic infrastructure' (the reference points for setting, describing and assuring the quality and standards of courses), although there remained room for improvement. There was effective use of formative assessment across all subjects but, in most colleges, student assessment was an area in need of further enhancement. There was clear evidence of development in the provision of learning resources.

Colleges placed considerable emphasis on developing the study skills of students to 'help them with the transition to higher-level study' and the proportion progressing to further study had also improved over the review period. Courses prepared students well for future employment and close links with employers are seen as 'key to helping students obtain subject-related employment'. Colleges made an important contribution to widening participation in higher education 'which has increasingly featured as a strength of college provision'. For teachers with no formal teaching qualification or experience, colleges frequently provided staff development and training (QAA 2008).

Unlike academic review, the IQER is a two-stage process of 'developmental engagement' (supporting the college in the development of its higher education) and 'summative review' (judging the effectiveness of college processes in managing the student learning experience). Between 2008-09 and 2010-11, 165 summative reviews were completed. The reviewers had 'confidence' in the standards of provision in all but three cases, two of which resulted in 'limited confidence' and one of 'no confidence'. Assessments were also made on the quality of learning opportunities. These resulted in 'confidence' judgements in all but two instances: one of 'limited confidence' and the other of 'no confidence'. In respect of public information, the reviewers confirmed 'reliance' in all except three cases where the judgement was in terms of 'no reliance' (QAA 2010, 2011b, 2012).

These results were comparable to the outcomes of institutional audits in 96 HEIs over the same period. Judgements of 'confidence' were made on the present and future management of standards and quality in all but six cases. Judgements of 'confidence' were made on the present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities in all but two instances. In neither of these two areas was there a case of 'no confidence'.

From September 2012, institutional audit will be replaced by institutional review and IQER will be replaced by a new process presently called 'institutional review for higher education in further education colleges'. Based on a core of common criteria against which all FECs with higher education and all HEIs will be judged, the replacement method for IQER will allow all higher education providers to 'demonstrate clearly whether they are meeting nationally-agreed threshold standards for awards' and 'reflecting nationally agreed good practice in the quality of students' learning opportunities'. With routine representation of students on review teams and their engagement in the quality assurance process, the new method will support 'continuous improvement on quality and standards as part of everyday institutional life' (QAA 2011b).

2.5.3 Colleges in the National Student Survey

The annual National Student Survey has been carried out on behalf of HEFCE since 2005. During this time the coverage has widened and developed. It is aimed at final year undergraduate students. Unlike in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the coverage in England includes FECs as well as HEIs. The survey comprises 22 core questions which are then grouped into seven categories for the purpose of analysis: teaching and learning; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources; personal development; and overall satisfaction.

For England, the surveys in 2008, 2009 and 2010 indicated a lower overall level of satisfaction with the quality of courses among students taught in FECs than for those taught in HEIs. In 2008, 76% of full-time students taught in colleges expressed overall satisfaction with their programmes compared to 82% in HEIs. There were differences as well in the pattern of response to groups of questions. In 2008 and 2009, respondents studying at FECs showed significantly different satisfaction profiles to scores of the total population. The largest differences were observed for the questions on 'assessment and feedback' (where FEC students were more satisfied) and for 'learning resources' and 'organisation and management' (where FEC students were less satisfied).

The questions on learning resources asked for ratings of library resources and services, access to general IT resources, and access to specialist equipment, facilities or rooms. Those on organisation and management covered the efficient working of the timetable, effective communication of any changes in the course or teaching, and the organisation and smooth running of the programme. On assessment and feedback, the questions addressed the clarity of criteria used in marking, the fairness of assessment arrangements and marking, the promptness of feedback, the extent of detailed comments on work, and the use of feedback to clarify understanding.

Although criticised by some for its methodology, student satisfaction scores from the NSS are one of six areas in the key information sets (KIS) planned for all undergraduate courses (including part-time and those taught through FECs) in 2013-14 (HEFCE 2011c). Key information sets are designed to meet the information needs of prospective students and will be published 'in context' on the websites of universities and colleges. Alongside student satisfaction, the KIS will contain standardised information about courses, employment and salary data, accommodation costs, financial matters (such as fees) and student union activities. Concerns have been expressed about the use of the NSS in FECs where smaller average class sizes might make it harder for them to be reported in the KIS.

2.5.4 Features of difference and distinctiveness

Both the outcomes of IQER and the NSS have contributed to a larger debate about the nature of the higher education experience in colleges, especially where it differs from that typically in HEIs. The Dearing inquiry had recommended a special mission for colleges focused on what it called 'sub-degree' higher education. Fifteen years on, higher education at these levels is still a shared mission between FECs and HEIs. There are still more students undertaking sub-Bachelor undergraduate qualifications in the higher education sector than in the colleges. The same is the case for other higher-level qualifications.

The differentiation sought by the Dearing inquiry found little favour within HEFCE:

> *It advised strongly against over-prescribing a role for FECs in delivering HE, taking the view that there was a need for HE in FECs, but not for a strict division of labour … and that an overly-rigid system of provision would be likely to stifle dynamism and responsiveness, both of which were important characteristics in embracing the changing nature of HE. (HEFCE 2006, p.10)*

On the other hand, HE in colleges should be different and distinctive:

> *It should have a number of characteristics – most of which will not be unique to it but will nevertheless differentiate it from the mainstream provision in HEIs. (ibid.)*

While not conforming to a single model of provision, HEFCE believed colleges should focus on the development of higher-level skills; on engaging employers closely and directly; on the needs of local and regional communities; on attracting students from under-represented groups; and on flexible short-cycle programmes delivered in a variety of modes, including work-based learning.

In its strategy statement on higher education in 2009, the previous Government stated its belief in 'a diverse ecology' of higher education in which student and employer choices, not administrative targets, should drive development.

> *We have no view on what proportion of higher education learners should be taught in further education colleges. (BIS 2009, p.104)*

Yet:

> *Further education colleges are universities and should not aim to be … the focus of higher education provision in further education colleges should be on skills, and on qualifications up to and including foundation degree level. (ibid.)*

These skills and qualifications were acquired in settings where the scale and intensity of teaching was distinctive to colleges. The smaller size and greater intimacy of the classes was not just a feature recognised by students but one which was seen as beneficial. For some students, it was among the reasons for choosing to study in a college (MEG 2010, Hudson and Berzins 2011). More contact and regular access to teaching staff was also a function of courses designed with more class contact time and frequently taught by small staff teams. Although reports on the outcomes of QAA reviews do not make direct

comparisons with the student and learning experience in HEIs, there is evidence to suggest a range and measure of difference.

> *Students benefit from a close working relationship with committed staff who provide a supportive and caring learning environment. Classes are often small and tutors know their students well. (QAA 2006, p. 2)*

Again:

> *Students are highly appreciative of the efforts and guidance of their teachers … Colleges place considerable emphasis on further developing and enhancing students' study skills to help them with the transition to higher-level study and provide the preparation for the increased demands of HE. Staff offer considerable developmental support outside timetabled teaching hours. (ibid. p.16)*
>
> *Colleges know the nature of their intake very well, particularly where a significant number of students progress from other programmes within the college. (ibid. p.17)*
>
> *Frequent formal and informal opportunities for students to discuss their general progress and voice any concerns contribute to good retention rates and can provide helpful records of issues raised and actions proposed. (ibid., p. 18)*

As in relation to other aspects of higher education in FECs, there are few in-depth studies of these features and dimensions. The rise of foundation degrees has led to a number of projects investigating their impact on students and the nature of the learning experience (Greenwood and Little 2008, Yorke and Longden 2010). These are reviewed as part of a wider examination of the literature on Foundation Degrees (Harvey 2009) but, in the main, they do not allow of comparison between courses taught in FECs and those in HEIs.

One exception was a small-scale study comparing pairs of similar courses taught in colleges and universities. This was part of a larger quantitative and qualitative appraisal of 'dimensions of difference' (Parry, Davies and Williams 2003). For full-time programmes, the differences were marked: not just in terms of contact hours but in the larger numbers and bigger spread of specialist staff allocated to courses in some HEIs. For part-time programmes, the differences were usually rather less, with teaching in HEIs not always conducted by staff who were engaged in research.

The study expressed caution about some of the conventional or taken for granted claims to distinctiveness. This was less to doubt the authority and veracity of the claims but more to highlight their appeal to values, approaches and purposes that define what, at the time, was styled 'the FE ethos', an expression (real or imagined) of the traditions and commitments of further education as a sector. On the ground, especially in parts of part-time higher education, the evidence indicated a more blurred and fluid picture.

> *Linked to this, we find evidence of divergence as well as convergence in these overlapping environments. Colleges sustain a size and intimacy that, in many respects, run counter to the scales and efficiencies demanded of mass higher education. There is strength and vulnerability in this situation. On the one side is*

a commitment to widen participation and increase retention in settings that continue to teach and support small groups of students. On the other is an argument for colleges to be treated in ways that enable them to become more like the major providers of higher education. (Parry, Davies and Williams 2003, p. 22)

2.6 Summary and conclusions

The higher education taught in further education colleges is modest in size but diverse in character. A whole range of higher education and higher-level qualifications is taught in the further education sector, but mostly at levels below the Bachelor's Degree and including a large number of non-prescribed courses and qualifications. The majority is studied on a part-time basis by adults holding a variety of qualifications (including previous higher education qualifications) and who work and live in the locality or region served by FECs. A significant minority is studied on a full-time basis, mainly to young people studying for the Foundation Degree, the Bachelor's Degree or the HND.

Not only do they receive their funding in at least three different ways (direct and indirect from HEFCE, and direct from SFA), their higher education and higher-level qualifications are validated and awarded by three main types of organisation (universities; examination bodies; and professional and statutory bodies) and externally reviewed or inspected by two quality agencies (QAA and Ofsted).

There has been little evidence of overall growth since the Dearing report invited colleges to lead future expansion at the sub-Bachelor levels. The numbers studying for non-prescribed qualifications appear to have declined, but not sharply. Several explanations have been put forward for the slow pace or absence of growth. One has to do with the variety and specificity of the markets for students and for the work-focused courses sought by employers for their workforces. In these circumstances, responsiveness to the needs of local communities and regional economies does not translate easily or necessarily into broader and stronger demand for higher education.

A second has to do with the low visibility and status of higher education in FECs, reflecting a larger view of further education in general and vocational education and training in particular. A third explanation is in terms of the divided structures, dual processes and semi-compulsory partnerships required by a two-sector system which, it is claimed, have hindered the development of policy and provision. Lastly, there is the argument, led by HEFCE, that some colleges have been insufficiently strategic in their thinking, planning and management of higher education.

At the same time, this is a segment of higher education that has been successful in contributing to new forms and styles of higher-level education and training, in partnership with HEIs and in association with employers. When reviewed by the QAA, nearly all colleges have received confidence judgements in respect of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities offered to students. This is similar to the outcomes achieved by HEIs, although less so for the results of the National Student Survey. Colleges have been equally successful in attracting students from a range of backgrounds, making their provision more representative of the general population than institutions in the higher education sector; and offering these students opportunities for progression and transfer to other levels of higher education and training.

The evidence base for understanding the nature of higher education in further education institutions is stronger for prescribed higher education than for non-prescribed courses and qualifications. Within the prescribed category, more is probably known about directly funded programmes and their students than about franchised arrangements. On the other hand, students registered at HEIs and taught in FECs can be described in ways not always open to students funded in other ways. As a consequence, comparisons of higher education within the college sector and between FECs and HEIs are not commonplace. In the next chapter, administrative data is presented in tables that allow for broad comparisons of provision and participation between institutions in the HE and FE sectors.

3 Patterns of provision and participation

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the numbers and characteristics of higher education students and courses taught in further education colleges are described and compared with those in higher education institutions. How administrative data is assembled for this purpose is not straightforward and, in any given year, it is not uncommon to find different numbers used to describe patterns of provision and participation.

The reasons for this difficulty arise from the collection of data on different bases by separate agencies and from the need to take account of franchised students. These are individuals registered with institutions in the higher education sector but taught by establishments in the further education sector. The Higher Education Statistics Agency collects and publishes statistical information on students, courses and institutions in the higher education sector. The Data Agency does the same for 'learners', qualifications and providers in the further education and skills system. Each agency produces annual time series data on the students registered with providers in their sector or system. In line with its funding responsibility for prescribed higher education in colleges, HEFCE has published annual data on franchised students from 1998-99 to 2006-07. These datasets are generated on different bases and, in the case of franchise students, the underlying populations used have changed between years. For these reasons, a time series for all higher education students taught in FECs is not routinely available.

Here, HESA and ILR data are brought together for the academic year 2009-10. At the commencement of the research, this was the earliest year for which data could be assembled and analysed to give a comprehensive cross-sectional picture of the higher education and higher level qualifications taught in the college sector. In order to ensure consistency in the production of numbers, the analytical work was undertaken by HEFCE who populated the tables presented in this chapter. A commentary on the technical and definitional issues surrounding the use of administrative data for such purposes was included in a recent statistical study undertaken for HEFCE on patterns of further and higher education in England where the base year was 2006-07 (Rashid et al 2011).

Most of the tables in this chapter present data on students and courses in HEIs and FECs. A small number of tables include data for 'other providers'. These represent a variety of providers in the further education system (such as local authorities, voluntary organisations, training providers and commercial enterprises) that are publicly funded mostly for courses at the Entry Level and at Levels 1, 2 and 3. There is a small amount of higher education taught in these settings but this is not examined in this study.

The analysis and discussion of these tables is deliberately brief in order to highlight the major similarities and differences in patterns of provision and participation in higher education between colleges in the further education sector and institutions in the higher education sector.

3.2 Qualifications and modes of study

In 2009-10, some 177,260 students were taught in further education colleges in England. This represented 8% or around one in twelve of the total higher education population (Table 3.1). The higher education component of colleges was a much smaller proportion (4%) of the nearly five million students taught in further education sector. It was a smaller fraction (2%) still of the more than seven million students studying in the larger further education system.

Table 3.1 Higher education and further education students by location of teaching, England, 2009-10 [Percentage student type in brackets]

	HEIs		FECs		Other providers		All providers	
Higher education	1,996, 345	[98%]	177, 260	[4%]	32,975	[1%]	2,206,580	[24%]
Further education	31,420	[2%]	4,666,835	[96%]	2,236,390	[99%]	6,934,645	[76%]
Total	2,027,770	[100%]	4,845,115	[100%]	2,269,370	[100%]	9,142,255	[100%]

Most of the higher education students taught in FECs were pursuing undergraduate education at levels below the Bachelor's Degree (nearly half, at 47%) or were undertaking qualifications at the other higher levels (just over a third, at 36%). The latter category is mainly non-prescribed higher education at levels which are not always specified in the ILR record. The remaining higher education taught in the college sector was at the Bachelors' level (14%), with another 3% at the postgraduate levels (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Higher education students by location of teaching and qualification aim, England, 2009-10 [Percentage qualification aim in brackets]

	HEIs		FECs		Other providers		All providers	
Postgraduate	475,620	[24%]	4,935	[3%]	5,200	[16%]	485,755	[22%]
Bachelor's Degree	1,159,130	[58%]	24,995	[14%]	6,545	[20%]	190,670	[54%]
Other undergraduate	112,670	[6%]	83,025	[47%]	8,225	[25%]	203,920	[9%]
Other higher level	248,930	[12%]	65,325	[37%]	13,005	[39%]	327,260	[15%]
Total	1,996,345	[100%]	177,260	[100%]	32,975	[100%]	2,206,580	[100%]

The shape of provision was different from that in the higher education sector where most students were studying for the Bachelor's Degree (58%) and nearly one-quarter were undertaking postgraduate qualifications. Other undergraduate education – the largest segment taught in FECs – was the smallest part of the higher education sector (at 6%). The study of other higher level qualifications was also proportionally smaller in the higher education sector (at 12%).

Although undergraduate education outside the Bachelor's Degree was the largest part of higher education in the FE sector (with around 83,000 students), there were more students studying for these qualifications in the HE sector (at close to 113,000 students). However, one-half of these were studying for DipHE and CertHE qualifications which, in the further education sector, were a very minor part of the provision. In other words, FECs were the main settings for the teaching of the HND, HNC and the Foundation Degree, although the latter was also taught in large numbers by HEIs. In the college sector, the FD was the dominant qualification taught at the higher education levels, being studied by 52,000 students or nearly 30% of college-taught higher education (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3 Higher education students taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges by qualification aim in England 2009-10 [Percentage part-time in brackets]

	HEIs		FECs	
Postgraduate	475,620	[48%]	4935	[74%]
Bachelor's Degree	1,159,130	[16%]	24,995	[22%]
Other undergraduate	112,670	[39%]	83,025	[45%]
Foundation Degree	*45,565*	*[54%]*	*52,470*	*[32%]*
HND	*7,500*	*[19%]*	*10,510*	*[17%]*
HNC	*3,260*	*[99%]*	*13,815*	*[95%]*
DipHE	*49,130*	*[14%]*	*2,200*	*[88%]*
CertHE	*7,210*	*[98%]*	*4,025*	*[93%]*
Other higher level	248,930	[93%]	64,305	[91%]
All qualification aims	1,996,345	[35%]	177,260	[60%]

Another difference between the two sectors was the balance of modes of study. In FECs, three out of five students (60%) were taught on a part-time basis whereas in HEIs part-time higher education was undertaken by a minority of students (35% or around one in three). Yet, undergraduate education in the college sector was mainly taught on a full-time basis (60%). Only the HNC (and the handful of students pursuing the DipHE and CertHE) was predominantly part-time. Two-thirds of Foundation Degree students in colleges were taught on a full-time basis. This was in contrast to HEIs where just over half of FD students were studying on a part-time basis.

3.3 College providers and programmes

Higher education was taught in the great majority of colleges: at 283 out of 349 FECs in the further education sector. Nevertheless, higher education was a small presence in all but a minority of colleges. Fifty-two FECs taught one-half of the higher education students in the sector. Most of these colleges had more 1000 students and nine of them had over 2000 students. Another 80 FECs had numbers between 500 and 999, followed by 108 colleges between 100 and 499, and 43 with less than 100 students. At one end of the sector were the 'mixed economy' colleges where higher education was a significant share of the total activity, although always a minority of the student numbers. At the other end of the sector were colleges – mostly sixth form colleges – with small pockets of provision (Table 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6).

Table 3.4 Higher education students taught at further education colleges by type of establishment and qualification aim, England, 2009-10 [Percentage type of establishment in brackets]

	Postgraduate	Bachelor's Degree	Other undergraduate	Other higher level	All qualification aims	
General FEC	4,705	21,450	76,865	61,700	164,715	[93%]
Specialist FEC	210	3,075	5,350	1,255	9,890	[6%]
Specialist designated	20	150	160	360	695	[0%]
Sixth form college	0	320	605	990	1,915	[1%]
Total	4,935	24,995	82,980	64,305	177,215	[100%]

Table 3.5 Number of further education colleges by size of higher education population, England, 2009-10

	General FEC	Specialist FEC	Specialist designated	Sixth form college	All FECs
4000+	2	0	0	0	2
3000+	3	0	0	0	3
2000+	4	0	0	0	4
1000+	41	2	0	0	43
500+	72	8	0	0	80
100+	93	7	2	6	108
Less than 100	9	2	4	28	43
Total	224	19	6	34	283

Table 3.6 Number of higher education courses taught at further education colleges by type of establishment and qualification aim, England, 2009-10

	Postgraduate	Bachelor's Degree	Other undergraduate	Other higher level	All qualification aims
General FEC	193	775	2,716	1,502	5,186
Specialist FEC	22	154	258	93	527
Specialist designated	2	6	10	6	24
Sixth form college	0	42	36	53	131
Total	217	977	3,020	1,654	5,868

Most higher education students (93%) studied in general further education colleges and nearly all general FECs were providers of higher education (224 out of 225). Fourteen of the 20 specialist FECs were also engaged in higher level work, with two having over 1000 students. Only a minority of specialist designated institutions (3 out of 13) and sixth form colleges (34 out of 91) offered one or more courses of higher education. The 130 or so higher education courses taught in sixth form colleges attracted around 2000 students.

3.4 Highest qualification on entry

In Tables 3.7 and 3.8, the highest qualification of entrants to Bachelors' Degrees and other undergraduate qualifications is indicated. There is no robust data for entrants to programmes leading to other higher level qualifications (non-prescribed higher education). Even for other undergraduate education, the highest qualification is not known for around one-quarter of entrants to FECs.

Table 3.7 Highest qualification on entry to Bachelors' Degrees taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges, England, 2009-10 [Percentage entry qualification in brackets]

	HEIs		FECs	
Postgraduate	3,635	[0%]	95	[0%]
Bachelor's Degree	35,600	[3%]	645	[3%]
Other undergraduate	86,920	[8%]	5,335	[21%]
Other higher level	36,705	[3%]	895	[4%]
GCE A-Level	764,255	[66%]	8,855	[35%]
BTEC Level 3	45,360	[4%]	2,515	[10%]
Access to higher education	34,110	[3%]	690	[3%]
Advanced modern apprenticeship	165	[0%]	0	{0%]
GCSE/GCE O Level	71,260	[6%]	1,740	[7%]
Accreditation of prior learning	660	[0%]	10	[10%]
Mature entry	5,285	[0%]	340	[1%]
Non-UK qualification	55,125	[5%]	650	[3%]
No formal qualification	7,765	[1%]	210	[1%]
Unknown	11,150	[1%]	3,005	[12%]
Total	1,157,995	[100%]	24,990	[100%]

Table 3.8 Highest qualification on entry to other undergraduate education taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges, England, 2009-10 [Percentage entry qualification in brackets]

	HEIs		FECs	
Postgraduate	35	[0%]	65	[0%]
Bachelor's Degree	265	[2%]	425	[2%]
Other undergraduate	775	[7%]	1,550	[6%]
Other higher level	320	[3%]	790	[3%]
GCE A-Level	5,540	[50%]	7,000	[28%]
BTEC Level 3	1,680	[15%]	5,095	[20%]
Access to higher education	240	[2%]	170	[1%]
Advanced modern apprenticeship	10	[0%]	35	[0%]
GCSE/GCE O Level	860	[8%]	2,465	[10%]
Accreditation of prior learning	35	[0%]	10	[0%]
Mature entry	605	[5%]	480	[2%]
Non-UK qualification	420	[4%]	355	[1%]
No formal qualification	125	[1%]	400	[2%]
Unknown	150	[1%]	6,250	[25%]
Total	11,060	[100%]	25,090	[100%]

In contrast to Bachelors' Degrees in HEIs where two-thirds of entrants had A-Levels as their highest qualification, those joining college-taught Bachelors' Degrees entered with a broader range of qualifications. Just over one-third entered with A-Levels and another 10% held BTEC national qualifications (compared to 4% in HEIs). Those entering on the basis of GCSE qualifications, mature entry, accredited prior learning or with no formal qualifications accounted for another 9% (compared to 7% in HEIs). Significantly, over one-quarter of entrants (28%) already possessed higher education qualifications (compared to 14% in HEIs). These were mostly at the other undergraduate levels. Included among these were likely to be students who completed a Foundation Degree or HND and who progressed directly to the final year or stage of a Bachelor's Degree.

As noted, data on the highest entry qualification of entrants to college-taught courses at the other undergraduate levels is missing for a large number of students. With this caution in mind, it would seem that the qualifications of entrants were again different, with one-half of those entering HEIs holding A-Levels compared to just over one-quarter in FECs.

3.5 Subjects of study

There was similarity and difference in the subjects taught in FECs and HEIs (Tables 3.9). The standard subject classification is based on broad categories. Given their strong vocational and occupational orientation, many of the higher education programmes taught in colleges are identified with specific areas of employment or are otherwise specialist.

Table 3.9 Higher education students taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges by subject of study, England, 2009-10 [percentage subject type in brackets]

	HEIs		FECs	
Medicine and dentistry	52,395		145	
Subjects allied to medicine	243,765	[12%]	10,885	[6%]
Biological sciences	145,790	[7%]	5,685	
Veterinary sciences	3,895		100	
Agriculture and related subjects	11,560		6,535	
Physical sciences	54,290		650	
Mathematical sciences	33,755		170	
Computer science	78,540		7,295	
Engineering and technology	120,955		14,320	[8%]
Architecture, building and planning	51,065		7,030	
Social studies	169,100	[8%]	9,915	
Law	77,995		1,530	
Business and administrative studies	277,895	[14%]	41,790	[24%]
Mass communications and documentation	44,620		1,560	
Languages	111,665		750	
Historical and philosophical studies	76,855		250	
Creative arts and design	141,060	[7%]	21,220	[12%]

	HEIs		FECs	
Education	118,705		33,175	[19%]
Combined	99,255		430	
Initial teacher training	55,015		10,620	[6%]
Geographical studies	28,170		200	
Unknown	0		3,010	
Total	1,996,345	[100%]	177,260	[100%]

For colleges, the largest subjects were business and administrative studies (24%), education (19%) and creative arts and design (12%). For HEIs, business and administrative studies was also the biggest group but representing a much smaller percentage of the total (14%). In the higher education sector, this subject was studied mainly on a full-time basis. In the further education sector it was undertaken mostly part-time. The two other largest subject categories in HEIs were subjects allied to medicine (12%) and social studies (8%).

3.6 Age, gender, ethnicity and disability

With the majority studying on a part-time basis, the higher education students in the college sector were older than their counterparts in HEIs. Adults aged 23 and over made up nearly two-thirds (65%) of the higher education population in further education colleges. By contrast, young people aged 22 and under were a majority in the higher education sector (Table 3.10).

Table 3.10 Higher education students taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges by age, England, 2009-10 [percentage age in brackets]

	HEIs		FECs	
17 and under	17,045	[1%]	1,445	[1%]
18 to 22	1,038,690	[52%]	61,000	[34%]
23 to 26	265,415	[13%]	21,890	[12%]
27 to 31	196,775	[10%]	20,895	[12%]
32 to 36	137,580	[7%]	17,120	[10%]
37 to 41	117,205	[6%]	18,150	[10%]
41 to 46	94,655	[5%]	16,580	[9%]

	HEIs		FECs	
47 to 51	60,840	[3%]	11,055	[6%]
52 to 56	32,615	[2%]	5,800	[3%]
57 to 61	16,905	[1%]	2,355	[1%]
62 to 66	9,100	[0%]	675	[0%]
67 and over	7,175	[0%]	195	[0%]
Unknown	2,350	[0%]	95	[0%]
Total	1,996,345	[100%]	177,260	[100%]

Both sectors taught more women than men on their higher education courses, in roughly similar proportions: 57% were women in HEIs and 56% were women in FECs (Table 3.11). In the college sector, women were majorities in all the main qualification types except for the HND and HNC. Women pursuing other higher level qualifications outnumbered men by a margin of 14 percentage points.

Table 3.11 Higher education students taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges by gender and qualification aim, England, 2009-10 [Percentage women in brackets]

	HEIs			FECs		
	Women		**Men**	**Women**		**Men**
Postgraduate	256,810	[54%]	218,805	3,100	[63%]	1,835
Bachelor's Degree	635,970	[55%]	523,155	15,055	[60%]	9,940
Other undergraduate	77,345	[69%]	35,325	40,870	[49%]	42,150
Foundation Degree	*28,015*	*[61%]*	*17,555*	*30,675*	*[58%]*	*21,800*
HND	*2,255*	*[30%]*	*5,245*	*3,595*	*[34%]*	*6,915*
HNC	*515*	*[16%]*	*2,745*	*2,845*	*[21%]*	*10,970*
DipHE	*41,850*	*[85%]*	*7,280*	*1,430*	*[65%]*	*765*
CertHE	*4,710*	*[65%]*	*2,500*	*2,325*	*[58%]*	*1,700*
Other higher level	165,330	[66%]	83,600	39,865	[62%]	24,440
Total	1,135,455	[57%]	860,885	98,895	[56%]	78,370

The further education sector taught smaller proportions of minority ethnic students than institutions in the higher education sector, with White or White British students accounting

for 83% of the total, compared to 68% for all higher education institutions (Table 3.12). Part of this difference was probably attributable to the larger proportion of international students in the higher education sector. Ethnicity was also not known for 4% of higher education students in FECs and 7% in HEIs.

Patterns of self-declared disability (Table 3.13) were the same for higher education students in each sector for those aged 20 and under (3%) and for those aged between 21 and 24 (1%). For those aged 25 or over, the proportion with a self-declared disability was slightly larger in FECs (5%) than in HEIs.

Table 3.12 Higher education students taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges by ethnicity, England, 2009-10 [percentage ethnic group in brackets]

	HEIs		FECs	
Black or Black British	130,305	[7%]	8,170	[5%]
Asian or Asian British	278,135	[14%]	11,360	[6%]
Other (including mixed)	84,580	[4%]	3,900	[2%]
White	1,364,110	[68%]	147,225	[83%]
Unknown	139,215	[7%]	6,610	[4%]
Total	1,996,345	[100%]	177,260	[100%]

Table 3.13 Higher education students taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges by disability and age, England, 2009-10 [percentage self-declared disability in brackets]

Disability	Age group	HEIs		FECs	
None	20 and under	796,320		42,640	
Self-declared	20 and under	68,455	[3%]	4,510	[3%]
None	21-24	320,890		24,860	
Self-declared	21-24	25,515	[1%]	2,355	[1%]
None	25 and over	723,850		94,720	
Self-declared	25 and over	61,315	[3%]	8,175	[5%]
Total		1,996,345		177,260	

3.7 Widening participation and region

Based on POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) data, Table 3.14 indicates the extent to which larger proportions of new higher education entrants in FECs were from areas of low participation in higher education compared to new higher education entrants in HEIs. In this table, the low participation group represents those entrants from areas in the bottom 20% for participation in higher education

Overall, 20% of new entrants to FECs were from low participation areas as against 11% for new entrants to HEIs. This was a difference (with rounding) of seven percentage points. The gap was wider for young entrants than for older entrants. For entrants under the age of 21 and between 21 and 24, the difference was eight and nine percentage points respectively. For those aged 25 and over, the difference was six percentage points: 12% of entrants to FECs compared to 6% of new entrants to HEIs. Unlike in HEIs, this older age group accounted for the majority of new entrants to FECs (60%) and – as with HEIs – most of them studied on a part-time basis (78%).

Table 3.14 Higher education new entrants taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges by widening participation profile (POLAR) and age, England, 2009-10 [percentage participation in brackets]

Low participation group	Age group	HEIs		FECs	
No	20 and under	241,360	[32%]	21,685	[20%]
Yes	20 and under	29,890	[4%]	5,190	[5%]
Unknown	20 and under	2,130	[0%]	265	[0%]
No	21-24	105,880	[14%]	13,095	[12%]
Yes	21-24	16,320	[2%]	3,725	[3%]
Unknown	21-24	1,975	[0%]	130	[0%]
No	25 and over	306,740	[40%]	53,295	[48%]
Yes	25 and over	48,555	[6%]	13,265	[12%]
Unknown	25 and over	6,195	[1%]	540	[0%]
Total		759,045	[100%]	111,190	[100%]

Table 3.15 Higher education students taught at higher education institutions and further education colleges by region, England, 2009-10 [percentage region in brackets]

	HEIs		FECs	
East Midlands	149,285	[9%]	13,190	[8%]
East of England	121,210	[7%]	11,725	[7%]
London	375,325	[21%]	15,770	[9%]
North East	102,645	[6%]	17,435	[10%]
North West	245,235	[14%]	28,760	[17%]
South East	231,005	[13%]	22,000	[13%]
South West	143,130	[8%]	24,535	[14%]
West Midlands	179,195	[10%]	18,510	[11%]

	HEIs		FECs	
Yorkshire and The Humber	199,640	[11%]	22,200	[13%]
Total	1,746,670	[100%]	174,125	[100%]

The availability of higher education by locality or region was also an important aspect of widening participation. The regions with the most higher education students in FECs were the North West (17%), South West (14%), Yorkshire and The Humber (13%) and the South East (13%). The lowest numbers were in the East of England (7%) and London (9%). This pattern of this provision reflected in part the location and contribution of HEIs in each region, as in the case of London which accounted for over a fifth of the higher education students taught in HEIs but a much smaller proportion of those taught in FECs (Table 3.15).

3.8 Funding routes

In 2009-10, direct funding from HEFCE to further education colleges supported the higher education of some 54,000 students. The majority were full-time students pursuing undergraduate education at levels below the Bachelor's Degree. Indirect funding from HEFCE accounted for close to 59,000 higher education students, with roughly equal numbers studying on a full-time or part-time basis. Slightly fewer franchised students than those on directly funded courses were undertaking Bachelors' Degrees. The small numbers studying for postgraduate qualifications were also supported by direct and indirect funding from HEFCE (Table 3.16).

Table 3.16 Higher education students taught at further education colleges by funding route, England, 2009-10 [Percentage funding route in brackets]

	Postgraduate	Bachelor's Degree	Other undergraduate	Other higher level	All qualification types	
HEFCE direct	1,856	13,125	39,340	55	54,380	[31%]
HEFCE indirect	1,690	9,450	35,525	11,895	58,555	[33%]
LSC/SFA	0	0	0	33,740	33,740	[19%]
Other non-HEFCE	1,380	2,425	8,165	18,615	30,580	[17%]
Total	4,935	24,995	83,025	64,305	177,260	[100%]

The funding for prescribed higher education provided by the Learning and Skills Council and then the Skills Funding Agency supported around 34,000 students, with another 30,000 or so funded from other sources. In both categories, the majority of students were studying on a part-time basis for other higher level qualifications.

Approaching 6,000 courses were supported by these four funding routes, with many more programmes funded indirectly by HEFCE than directly. Of the nearly 800 courses supported by the LSC/SFA, most were offered on a part-time basis and all led to other higher level qualifications. The fourth funding route (Other non-HEFCE) also mostly supported part-time higher level education but some of these courses were also in postgraduate and undergraduate education (Table 3.17).

Table 3.17 Higher education courses taught at further education colleges by funding route, England, 2009-10 [Percentage funding route in brackets]

	Postgraduate	Bachelor's Degree	Other undergraduate	Other higher level	All qualification levels	
HEFCE direct	56	103	498	2	659	[11%]
HEFCE indirect	132	828	2,330	662	3,952	[67%]
LSC/SFA	0	0	0	761	761	[13%]
Other non-HEFCE	29	46	192	229	496	[8%]
Total	217	977	3,020	1,654	5,868	[100%]

In Table 3.18, the source and combination of funding routes at different types of college are indicated. Some 45% of FECs drew on two funding routes. These were usually a combination of HEFCE indirect and SFA/Other. Another 31% relied on three funding routes. These were HEFCE direct, HEFCE direct and SFA/Other.

Table 3.18 Source and combination of funding route by type of further education college, England, 2009-10

	General FEC	Specialist FEC	Specialist designated institution	Sixth form college	All college types
HEFCE direct only	0	0	0	1	1
HEFCE indirect only	0	0	0	12	12
SFA/Other only	8	2	2	9	21
HEFCE direct + indirect	0	0	0	0	0
HEFCE direct + SFA/Other	15	3	1	0	19
HEFCE indirect + SFA/Other	103	9	3	11	126
HEFCE direct + indirect + SFA/Other	98	5	0	1	104
Total	224	19	6	34	283

3.9 Indirect funding partnerships

A total of 68 (out of 143) higher education institutions were in indirect funding partnerships with 245 (out of 349) further education colleges. This included 20 pre-1992 universities (most with one or two college partners), 45 post-1992 universities (most with multiple college partners and 16 in partnership with ten or more colleges) and three other higher education establishments. In other words, slightly less than one-half of HEIs had one or more indirect funding relationships with FECs. A majority (over two-thirds) of pre-1992 universities operated such arrangements. A minority of pre-1992 universities (less than one-third) and a minority of other HEIs (less than one-quarter) were involved in these relationships (Table 3.19)

Table 3.19 Indirect funding partnerships by type of higher education institution and number of partner further education colleges, England, 2009-10

Number of further education college partners	Pre-1992 universities	Post-1992 universities	Other higher education institutions	All types of higher education institution
None	45	20	10	75
One	6	2	1	9
Two	5	1	1	7
Three	4	2	0	6
Four	2	8	1	11
Five	2	4	0	6
Six	1	4	0	5
Seven	0	6	0	6
Eight	0	0	0	0
Nine	0	2	0	2
Ten or more	0	16	0	16
Total	65	65	13	143

Table 3.20 Indirect funding partnerships by type of Further Education College and number of partner higher education institutions, England, 2009-10

Number of partner higher education institutions	General FEC	Specialist FEC	Specialist designated institution	Sixth form college	All college types
None	21	6	10	67	104
One	90	7	2	20	119
Two	72	7	0	4	83
Three	32	0	1	0	33
Four	5	0	0	0	5
Five	2	0	0	0	2
Six	2	0	0	0	2
Seven	0	0	0	0	0
Eight	1	0	0	0	1
Total	225	20	13	91	349

On their side, 119 colleges had one partner, 83 had two partners and 33 had three partners. One FEC had as many as eight higher education partners. A total of 245 (out of 349) FECs received indirect funding numbers from partner HEIs. Most of these (204) were general further education colleges. The remainder comprised 14 specialist colleges, three specialist designated institutions and 24 sixth form colleges (Table 3.20).

3.10 Employment

Finally, a number of features of the employment profile of full-time leavers from FECs and HEIs are summarised. The data for these tables is taken from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey for 2008-09 and 2009-10. Two years worth of data was used in order to increase the number of data cuts that met the threshold. The higher education in FECs is for leavers from both direct and indirectly funded programmes. Directly funded higher education in colleges was included in the DLHE for the first time in 2008-09.

In Table 3.21, the median salary levels of leavers six months after graduation are shown by subject and level of study. As noted previously, the subjects with the largest numbers of full-time college-taught students were creative arts and design (26%) and business and administrative studies (19%) followed by education (9%) and social studies (7%). In each of these subjects there was a salary differential in favour of HEIs. In creative arts and

design, the gap was £3,000 for Bachelors' Degrees and £8,000 for other undergraduate qualifications. In business and administrative studies the gap was smaller: £2,500 for Bachelors' Degrees and £4,000 for other undergraduate qualifications.

Table 3.21 Median salary of leavers with a Bachelor's Degree and other undergraduate qualifications by subject of study, England, 2008-10

	Bachelor's Degree		Other undergraduate	
	HEI	FEC	HEI	FEC
Subjects allied to medicine	£21,000	£20,000	£21,000	£17,000
Biological sciences	£15,200	£14,000	£21,000	£13,000
Agriculture and related subjects	£17,000	£14,000	£17,000	£16,000
Physical sciences	£18,000	£13,000	£21,500	£14,000
Mathematical sciences	£21,000	£13,650		
Computer science	£20,000	£16,000	£21,000	£18,000
Engineering and technology	£23,000	£14,700	£24,000	£24,500
Architecture, building and planning	£20,000	£19,500	£23,000	£24,000
Social studies	£19,000	£17,000	£25,000	£16,000
Law	£16,000	£14,000	£24,000	£14,000
Business and administrative studies	£18,000	£15,500	£24,000	£20,000
Mass communications and documentation	£15,000	£12,000	£15,000	£12,500
Languages	£16,000	£13,000		
Historical and philosophical studies	£16,000	£15,150	£21,000	£20,000
Creative arts and design	£15,000	£12,000	£20,000	£12,000
Education	£21,000	£17,000	£21,000	£23,000
Geographical studies	£16,000	£14,000		
Median for all students	£18,000	£14,000	£21,000	£20,000

There were some subjects at the other undergraduate levels where the salary differential was slightly higher for leavers from FECs: engineering and technology; architecture,

building and planning; and education. There were subjects at the Bachelors' level where the differential favoured college leavers. The median salary for all Bachelors' students was £18,000 at HEIs and £14,000 at FECs. For other undergraduate qualifications it was £21,000 at HEIs and £20,000 at FECs. Caution should be exercised in interpreting these figures given the breadth of the subject categories, the different work and career patterns of specific occupations, and the roles played by Bachelors' and other undergraduate qualifications in different areas of employment.

In Table 3.22, the destinations of graduates with Bachelors' Degrees are compared between FECs and HEIs. A slightly higher percentage of college leavers were in work six months after graduation (65%, compared to 61%in HEIs). A slightly higher proportion were unemployed (12%) compared to leavers from HEIs (10%). The percentage of HEI leavers pursuing further study was double that of college leavers, yet a higher proportion of leavers from FECs were combining work and study.

Table 3.22 UK leaver destinations six months after graduation with a Bachelor's Degree, England, 2008-10

	HEI (%)	FEC (%)
Work	61%	65%
Further study	16%	8%
Work and study	8%	10%
Unemployed	10%	12%
Other	5%	5%

The main occupational destinations of college leavers were health and social work followed by wholesale, retail and motor trade and by education. For leavers from HEIs, the main destinations were wholesale, retail and motor trades followed by education and by health and social work (Table 3.23).

Table 3.23 Standard industrial classification of employment of leavers six months after graduation with a Bachelor's Degree, England, 2008-10

	HEI (%)	FEC (%)
Farming, fishing and forestry	0%	1%
Mining and manufacturing	4%	4%
Electricity, gas and water supply	1%	1%
Construction	2%	2%

	HEI (%)	FEC (%)
Wholesale, retail and motor trades	16%	20%
Hotels and restaurants	6%	7%
Transport, storage and communication	7%	5%
Financial and real estate activities	6%	3%
Professional, scientific and technical activities	9%	8%
Defence, public administration and social security	10%	10%
Education	12%	15%
Health and social work	20%	13%
Arts, entertainment and recreation	5%	8%
Other community, social and personal services	2%	4%

In terms of the standard occupation classification, both FECs (28%) and HEIs (31%) had a significant proportion of their leavers in the category of associate professional and technical occupations. College leavers (14%) were much less represented in professional occupations than HEI leavers (24%). Within elementary occupations, the percentages were similar at 8% for leavers from FECs and 6% from HEIs (Table 3.24)

Table 3.24 Standard occupation classification of employment of leavers six months after graduation with a Bachelor's Degree, England, 2008-10

	HEI (%)	FEC (%)
Managers and senior officials	8%	8%
Professional occupations	24%	14%
Associate professional and technical occupations	31%	28%
Administrative and secretarial occupations	10%	8%
Skilled trades occupations	1%	2%
Personal service occupations	6%	12%
Sales and customer service occupations	13%	18%
Process, plant and machine operatives	0%	1%
Elementary occupations	6%	8%
Not known/Not applicable	0%	1%

3.11 Summary and conclusions

The 177,000 students taught in FECs were mainly pursuing undergraduate qualifications (61%) or undertaking non-prescribed courses leading to professional and vocational qualifications at the higher levels (37%). The rest (3%) were postgraduate students. Most college-taught higher education students studied on a part-time basis but this was different for undergraduate education (where just over one-half were defined as full-time students). By contrast, most of the students pursuing other higher level qualifications were part-time in their mode of study.

Although there was an overlap in the kinds of higher education offered in the HE and FE sectors, the shape of provision in each sector was different. Whereas most students in the higher education sector were aiming for a Bachelor's Degree and nearly one-quarter were undertaking postgraduate qualifications, the largest segment in the further education sector was undergraduate education below the level of the Bachelor's Degree. Within the latter, the Foundation Degree was the dominant qualification in FECs (followed by the HNC and HND). In the HEIs, the Foundation Degree and the DipHE were the main qualifications.

In England, the bulk of higher education was concentrated in 143 HEIs. Another 8% was scattered among 283 FECs, mostly in small amounts. However, a minority (52) of colleges accounted for one-half of the higher education population in the FE sector. Nearly all these larger providers were general further education colleges, most with more than 1,000 students and two with over 4,000 students.

In addition to its density of providers and diversity of programmes and qualifications, higher education in the college sector was plural in its funding routes and relationships. Close to one-half of colleges depended on two funding routes: usually indirect HEFCE funding combined with that provided by the SFA (or other non-HEFCE sources). More than one-third relied on three funding routes: direct HEFCE funding, indirect HEFCE funding and SFA/Other funding. Indirect funding relationships, with single or multiple partners were a prominent feature of the higher education landscape. Most FECs and just less than one-half of HEIs were party to indirect funding relationships. Post-1992 universities were in the van of these developments, although 20 pre-1992 universities also franchised the teaching of some of their courses to colleges (albeit on smaller scale than in most post-1992 universities).

Colleges also contributed to widening participation in important ways. Compared to HEIs, students in FECs were older, more likely to be studying part-time and, in the case of undergraduate entrants, more likely to have come from areas of low participation in higher education. Those joining undergraduate courses also held a broader range of entry qualifications. A smaller proportion entered with A-Levels and a larger proportion possessed Level 3 vocational qualifications (in the form of BTEC national qualifications). At the same time, those entering with higher education qualifications were a larger percentage in colleges than in HEIs, with many of these likely to be students who had completed a FD or HND and who then moved directly to the final year of a Bachelor's Degree.

That said, there was some evidence of employment outcomes and salary differentials across a number of subject and qualification types that favoured full-time leavers from HEIs over those from FECs. However, much of the data on these outcomes for FECs was recent, based on small numbers and limited to full-time undergraduate education. Furthermore, the subject areas and employment profiles of higher education in FECs were often vocationally specific or specialist in their occupational orientation.

While women students outnumbered men in both sectors, the further education sector taught smaller proportions of minority ethnic students than institutions in the higher education sector. Given that FECs recruited mainly locally or regionally, this difference was attributable in part to the larger proportion of international students attracted to institutions in the HE sector. In the case of disability, patterns were broadly similar for young and older age groups in each sector.

4 Strategies of colleges and partner higher education institutions

4.1 Introduction

This chapter considers: (i) the strategies and policies for, and organisation and management of, higher education provision in the case-study further education colleges, as reported by their Principals and Vice-Principals (or other senior managers) responsible for such provision; and (ii) the strategies and policies of partner higher education institutions with regard to higher education programmes they validate in, or franchise to, these colleges – and the organisation and management of their partnerships with FECs.

The findings are based on face-to-face interviews with the Principals and senior managers responsible for higher education in the 25 case-study colleges, and telephone interviews with the senior managers responsible for managing links with FECs in sixteen partner HEIs. Interviews with college managers last between sixty and ninety minutes. Interviews with those in partner HEIs were up to one hour in length.

The case-study colleges included a range of FECs, some with dedicated university centres. The sample included a range of FECs and included colleges with dedicated university centres. However, the college sample excluded FECs with fewer than 400 higher education students (to ensure an adequate response in the student survey). The nature of the sample needs to be borne in mind in assessing the significance of the findings and the conclusions that have drawn from them.

The chapter consists of (i) findings with regard to FECs (4.2 – 4.2.9); (ii) findings with regard to partner HEIs (4.3 – 4.3.7); and (iii) a summary of key findings and conclusions.

4.2 Further education colleges

4.2.1 Current provision

A common characteristic is that current higher education provision in FECs is overwhelmingly vocational, and responsive to the needs of employers and students. However, the course portfolio appears to be less stable than in HEIs because of the close links between particular forms of provision and specific employers (and also because some colleges have struggled to meet student number targets).

The majority is at HN and FD level. But there was Bachelors-level provision in all the case-study colleges – either top-up from FD courses, which were the majority; or in a small number of instances free-standing degree programmes. Bachelors-level provision appears to have developed in three contexts: (i) long-established degree programmes in mixed-economy colleges with higher education centres, sometimes on separate campuses (in effect, mini-'university colleges'); (ii) provision in specialist colleges, e.g. art and design or

land-based; and (ii) degree-level programmes that are integral elements in vocational pathways (in which academic level may be a secondary factor). In all three instances there is also a modest but significant desire to introduce/expand postgraduate provision.

The Principal of a college with very large numbers of HE students summed it up in these terms:

> *All our HE provision grows organically out of Level 3 provision. It is all vocational; we have no academic courses.*

In general, provision in FECs appears to be complementary to provision in neighbouring HEIs (although, to some extent, this may be the result of restrictive policies by HEIs with regard to franchised student numbers and validation arrangements). A typical response to the question whether FECs and HEIs have different roles was:

> *Not really categorically different; it is much more of a spectrum of multi-layered provision. The college's offer is complementary to those of the two universities.*

4.2.2 Rationales

From the evidence of interviews in the case-study colleges there appears to be variety of rationales for offering higher education courses:

i) The most significant rationale for HE provision in the FECs in our sample is 'legacy', the historically determined advanced provision which the colleges have offered;

ii) Closely linked to this rationale, but distinct from it, is close links with local employers. This is reflected in the emphasis on part-time provision for (often adult) vocational learners;

> *All course developments are closely linked to the local skills agenda, so there is a stress on higher skills and apprentices.*

> *We offer education that allows students immediately to enter the workplace.*

iii) An important but perhaps less significant rationale is the progression opportunities that such provision offers to students on FE programmes in the college. Particularly in the case of colleges with substantial, and often high-quality, 'sixth form' provision there appears to be an expectation that these students will progress on to 'mainstream' HE;

Progression is our philosophy. We should be able to take in a learner at Level 1 and progress them to Level 7 if required. Then students can see a progression route right through FE and HE – which, as far as we are concerned, is a single offer.

iv) A fourth rationale is FECs' role in making available local provision of higher education for students who are, for a variety of reasons less able to travel even to adjacent HEIs. This is linked to (but not identical with) provision for students from disadvantaged social groups;

One of our primary aims is to increase the amount of HE offered in the borough, which has one of the lowest participation rates in the country. Despite sitting on the edge of the city with probably the largest HE campus in Europe, local people simply won't go.

v) A fifth rationale is niche and specialised provision, whether historically determined (i.e. 'legacy' provision) or determined by the specialist character of the college (e.g. art and design or land-based).

Less conspicuous is a desire to compete with HEIs by offering alternative forms of higher education, although the distinctive character of higher education in FECs is also emphasised.

4.2.3 Future provision

There is a general expectation that HE provision will expand, despite past recruitment difficulties and the constraints imposed by student number controls. Several colleges have undertaken significant pruning/refocusing of their portfolios to concentrate on courses with stronger demand.

There appears to be less concern than in many HEIs that overall demand may be reduced as a result of higher fees – for two main reasons: first, all FECs in the sample are planning to charge competitive fees; and, secondly, their provision is more local (in terms of student recruitment and links to specific employers) and so less exposed to any general decline. Nevertheless there is concern in some colleges that the impact of higher fees might be greater on vocational learners than traditional A-Level students, which is borne out by greater-than-average reductions in UCAS applications for some FECs in the sample.

A third reason, of course, is the provision in the White Paper to allow institutions charging average fees of less than £7.5K to bid for additional student places, which all the FECs in the sample are planning to do (although most initially assumed that HEIs would be unable to bid, which proved to be mistaken as more HEIs modified their access agreements by switching scholarships/bursaries into fee waivers). However, it is important to add that college managers place greater emphasis on local labour market conditions than on lower-than-average fee levels as a determinant of future growth. One college Principal also expressed concern about the possible differential impact of higher fees:

Traditional A-Level students are much more self-confident and recognise the value of higher education; it is not the same with all vocational learners.

Few colleges are planning major changes in the focus of their provision. At this stage there is little evidence of upward 'academic drift', or a desire to compete directly with HEIs. The most common expectation was summed up by another principal who anticipated:

Slow incremental growth.

4.2.4 Students

Two major characteristics of students studying HE courses in FECs are emphasised in most of the colleges in our sample:

i) Students are 'local' – not simply in terms of geography (although many are unable to travel far to study for personal reasons) but also of culture and aspiration (for example, their peer groups' 'comfort zone'). These students generally come from less advantaged socio-economic groups and many want to study part-time (or, at least, in more flexible patterns than is always possible in an HEI);

Widening participation students tend to want to stay at home.

There is a growing group of students who have to stay locally but don't necessarily get placed on one of the local degree programmes.

ii) They want to study vocational courses, often part-time while continuing in employment. Many have vocational rather than academic qualifications; and they may have more focused expectations of what studying a HE courses may deliver for them (and, as a result, place a lower value on less tangible aspects of the student experience in a typical HEI).

Our students are different from mainstream students; most are employed, most want a qualification directly relevant to their work.

Most of our students think they are here to work, get their qualifications and get a job.

However, among our interviewees there is some reluctance to 'stigmatise' students taking HE programmes in FECs or to accept a 'deficit' model to describe their major characteristics as distinct from those of students in HEIs. Some of the colleges in our sample also enrol full-time students onto Bachelors' courses in academic subjects, although these are very much the exception.

Some of the students who stay with us want to stay in a small, and safe, environment. But we also get some high-achieving students. I'm not sure how you correlate that.

4.2.5 Organisation of higher education provision

The most common pattern is for the delivery of HE and FE to be integrated (for example, in terms of shared curriculum leads, teaching staff contributed to both and standard conditions of service) but for (a) distinctive arrangements to be made for the management of HE provision at a senior level (principally with regard to managing quality but also in the context of strategic leadership); and (b) separate HE 'centres' to be developed (often with the intention of offering HE students a social base, strengthening the HE 'ambience' in the college and improving the learning experience of these students).

However, there are important exceptions:

- Some colleges in the sample organise FE and HE entirely separately, with separate curriculum areas, separate physical spaces for HE and FE students and (in a small

number of cases) more favourable conditions of service for staff teaching in HE programmes;

- In contrast, some colleges in the sample with large numbers of HE students believe that this creates sufficient critical mass of HE provision to make special treatment in terms of organisation unnecessary (although they are still obliged to make separate arrangements for the management of HE programmes because of the requirement to provide reliable data, to develop HE strategies and to meet quality assurance criteria).

To a significant extent the choice between these three organisational patterns – mixed; separate development; or integration – is dependent on the history of colleges, the pattern of subjects, the geography of their site(s) and pressure from students.

4.2.6 Partnerships with HEIs

There appears to be a vigorous 'market' in HEI partnerships. Most colleges have multiple partners offering different levels of service/engagement and also different patterns of value-for-money. If an existing partner is unable or unwilling to validate a new programme, there seems to be little difficulty in securing another partner. In some cases the validation of programmes has been shifted because of changes in academic emphasis (for example, from the scientific content to business applications).

As a result validation arrangements can appear incoherent. Most colleges in the sample recognise the risks associated with too wide a spread of partners, particularly in terms of the time commitment of senior managers. Many are attempting to focus their HEI partnerships and concentrate on a 'preferred' partner. However, few colleges with multiple HEI partners seem to want to go further and have an exclusive partner. In many cases this is not feasible (in terms of the availability of relevant curriculum expertise); nor is it considered desirable (because of the risks associated with a change of personnel and policy in the partner HEI).

Generally relationships are good with little evidence of competitive behaviour (although at least two of the HEIs validating programmes in case-study colleges have recently either withdrawn from franchising or introduced greater restrictions, apparently to improve their own competitive positions).

> *The relationship between the college and university is trust-based.*

But there are contrary views:

> *There is still scope for collaboration. But we only work with universities where there is a commonality of interest. Universities aren't that good at partnering for altruistic reasons – we are not so hot either!*

The most common complaints are about over-long decision-making which has undermined colleges' capacity to respond quickly ('Colleges work in a different time zone') and, more occasionally about condescending behaviour on the part of some HEIs). But in most cases these are outweighed by major advantages:

i) The access that HEI validation offers FE staff teaching on HE programmes to wider disciplinary communities:

It offers access to a different perspective, as well as to subject expertise.

ii) The strength of a university 'brand':

Brand is the big thing – although often there is also cross-fertilisation from other people [from other colleges] in the partnership.

Some colleges do not place the same value on the university brand:

> *At one time we were less confident about what our students thought. We thought they might value the brand. But actually they are pretty much indifferent to it. Mind you, if it was Oxford or Cambridge they might be a bit chirpier!*

However, there are concerns. A typical attitude appears to be that, while at an operational level partnerships work well, there is always a possibility that strategic differences may develop. There is also a tendency to regard partner HEIs as constraining college ambitions, although the HEIs are themselves subject to the same constraints on growth – a case perhaps of 'shooting the messenger'? The main threats to the continuation of existing partnerships are seen as (a) policy changes on the part of the HEI in a volatile post-White Paper policy environment (whether withdrawal from validation altogether or restrictions on which subjects/levels/courses HEIs will be prepared to validate); and (b) uncertainties about whether HEIs will attempt to claw back student numbers in the case of franchised provision. Indeed, some colleges are attempting to negotiate transfers of franchised numbers.

Several of the larger colleges in the sample expressed an interest in applying for degree-awarding powers and some are actively pursuing this option. But some have already concluded that it would be a disproportionate effort in relation to the size of their present and anticipated HE provision. Even those actively pursuing degree-awarding powers appear to be doing so not much because they are dissatisfied with existing HEI validation arrangements but (a) as a back-up if their HEI partner changes their policy (as has already happened with at least two of the validating HEIs of colleges in our sample); and (b) to enable the college to compete on a level playing-field with private providers with these powers.

4.2.7 Costs

Most of the case-study colleges have set fee levels in the region of £6-7K from 2012-13, although some have set fees at more than £8K and at least one is planning to charge less than £5K. In a few cases fee levels have been determined by HEIs, e.g. in HEI-led consortia and for franchised provision. But in most cases the evidence suggests that HEIs have been relaxed when colleges have decided to charge lower fees for validated provision and have raised no objections.

There appears to be some variation in the ability of the FECs in our sample to apportion rigorously the costs of overall HE provision (as opposed to individual courses). Often this is not because of a general weakness in costing systems but because of the provision of

both FE and HE programmes in common curriculum areas. In nearly all the colleges in the sample HE courses are expected to make the same contribution to overheads and other corporate expenses as FE courses. There is little evidence of any desire to treat HE courses as 'loss leaders' – rather the contrary because most colleges have well developed business-case planning systems in operation. Although there is a general perception that HE provision is attractive in financial terms, this is not necessarily because it is regarded as more profitable but because its funding is (has been) more predictable. Here is a typical comment:

> *We are not making a large contribution from HE – but we are making a 'decent' contribution.*

Although few interviewees are in a position to offer detailed cost comparisons between FEC and HEI provision, the former is widely regarded as (certainly) highly competitive in terms of cost and (probably) significantly cheaper. The major evidence offered is (a) flatter management structures with fewer layers of intermediate managers; (b) lower overall staff costs (mainly because FECs had many fewer promoted posts); and (c) more flexible staff contracts with substantially higher teaching commitments in terms of hours-per-week/year. These cost advantages are mitigated by (a) generally much smaller class sizes (which in an HEI might be regarded as uneconomic); and (b) more generous allowances in some colleges in our sample for staff teaching predominantly on HE courses.

> *We have a very robust performance management system. Our staff teach twice as much as in most universities. Their core job is teaching and supporting students and they do that for 38 hours a week.*

> *We don't have the overheads that a university would have; we're more adaptable, able to expand and contract as demand changes, because our staff move between HE and FE teaching … FE provision provides a buffer to cope with increases or decreases in HE numbers.*

But there is some concern about being labelled a cheap option:

> *We deliver differently for the same level of resource – and we probably deliver more. But that is not to say we are delivering more cheaply.*

4.2.8 Quality and standards

In terms of the multiple forms of evidence available there appears to be little ground for general concern about academic quality and standards with regard to HE provision in FECs. This is generally confirmed by our sample of colleges. Both reports of Ofsted inspections (although their direct relevance to HE provision can be questioned) and IQERs by the Quality Assurance Agency are generally complimentary. Prompt action is taken on any areas of concerns/for improvement that are identified. Relations with validating universities are generally good, as has already been stated. Relationships between HEI and FEC staff appear to be collegial and developmental. Remarkably perhaps, there appears to be little resentment of these multiple layers of scrutiny.

4.2.9 Student experience and learning culture

The general pattern that emerges is of a qualitatively different model of HE delivery in FECs:

- On the one hand, it is acknowledged that students in FECs do not have access to the full range of experiences available in HEIs – in particular with regard to extra-curricular activities but also in terms of access to the full range of learning resources (and contact with research-active teachers). Many colleges in our sample are making significant efforts to mitigate what is widely seen as a deficit – for example, by investing more in social space, improving student accommodation (where such accommodation exists), enhancing access to learning resources and encouraging scholarly, and research and consultancy, activities by teaching staff;

- On the other hand, students in FECs are taught in smaller groups in an environment with which they may already be familiar and/or which may be less threatening to those who come from more deprived backgrounds. This pattern of small-group teaching is in contrast with what is assumed to be a more typical HEI pattern of large lectures interspersed with occasional tutorials. In addition students in FECs are offered more frequent access to teachers. The general impression offered by interviewees was of a nurturing rather than a sink-or-swim learning culture (although this may be unfair to many, even most, HEIs – and in specialist areas such as art and design there is little difference between FEC and HEI learning cultures). Finally, it is asserted that the 'full' student experience in an HEI may not be appropriate for, or desired by, vocational learners on part-time courses.

  Our students don't want an 'undergraduate experience'. They are too busy juggling work and a family.

  Many come from working-class backgrounds and they want value-for-money. They don't want the normal university experience, the bright lights. Their attitude is: 'we are paying to get something, and that's what we want to focus on'.

  The biggest difference between colleges and universities is the 'student life' – some want it; others don't and they are the norm here. They know they are coming to a quiet campus. But we do give them space to think and space to grow.

However some doubts also exist. One Principal, while acknowledging the college could not offer 'Full "HE-ness"', argued that the college could offer HE students a more normal and multi-faceted experience – 'less cut-off and more representative of society as a whole'. Another Principal wondered about the educational advantages of more supported study:

> *We even have conversations about 'over-preparedness' and 'over-protectedness'. Do we have too many hours in the curriculum? How well do we prepare students for independent study?*

4.3 Higher education institutions: partnership perspectives

4.3.1 Strategic drivers/rationales

There appear to be four major strategic drivers for HEIs establishing partnerships with FECs – the legacy of historical links; desire to develop and strengthen a regional footprint; pressures to demonstrate progress on widening participation; and ambitions to build closer links with employers.

Legacy

Partnerships are long-standing, often dating back two or three decades:

1. Some reflect a, widely accepted, overlap in provision between FECs and HEIs (in particular, 'post-1992' universities), especially at HNC/D level. Although some attempts have been made to rationalise this provision by assigning separate spheres of activity/competence to colleges and universities (for example, by allocating most part-time sub-Bachelor provision to colleges), the overlap continues. However, this does not appear to be a source of significant tension between FECs and HEIs (with exceptions noted below). A degree of contingency (to explain how any overlaps have developed) and pragmatism (in terms of justifying, and managing, them) seems to be widely accepted;

2. The development of Foundation Degrees over the past decade has tended to increase the overlap of provision in the case of HEIs that offer on-campus FDs. But at the same time FDs have acted as a major spur to, and focus for, the growth of FE-HE partnerships. The availability of funded additional student numbers through most of the 2000s had a similar effect;

3. Another important factor is that many FE-HE partnerships were initially developed 'bottom-up' through links between academic units rather than as a result of whole-institution initiatives, and were often driven by committed individuals. In the past decade more systematic strategic and management frameworks have been developed – but they have not always succeeded in removing the eclectic characteristics of many partnerships.

Footprint

Many FE-HE partnerships appear to be an assertion of territoriality by HEIs, a latter-day reflection of being a 'civic' university in the case of some 'pre-1992' universities and of community engagement in the case of 'post-1992' universities. These partnerships are a practical expression of 'connectedness' – alongside continuing education provision, links with schools in the context of teacher education, contracts with the National Health Service to educate local healthcare workers, and artistic and other cultural initiatives. As one interviewee simply put it: 'we want to be good neighbours and help local colleges if we can'.

In the case of some HEIs the regional dimension is seen as significant. Although talk of establishing regional frameworks for higher education in England (encouraged by HEFCE in the early 2000s) has faded away, 'regionality' appears to have entered into the policy consciousness of several HEIs. The ambition to develop more comprehensive HE provision across all institutions in a region seems to have been influential in persuading

some HEIs to develop, or sustain, partnerships with FECs. This is more marked in less populated and more geographically remote areas with comparatively low levels of HE participation than in big cities where HE provision is more concentrated and, as a result, more comprehensive (without the same need perhaps for coordination).

Widening participation

FE-HE partnerships are seen as making a major contribution to widening participation. This is especially the case with 'pre-1992' universities. With 'post-1992' universities with more diverse student populations widening participation is less a strategic imperative but it is still a major factor. The validation of FEC courses is seen as a way in which students, especially local and 'non-standard' students who would otherwise find it difficult to enter the university can still gain some form of 'university experience'. This belief appears to be particularly strong when the validating HEI is a 'pre-1992' university, although it also applies when it is a 'post-1992' university. In fact there is little evidence that FEC managers continue to make much of this historical distinction. In some cases this is seen in the wider context of progression, either from university-validated courses in FECs or direct-entry students who have taken A-level and equivalent courses in colleges. So validation (and franchising) is part of a wider picture. In a few cases partnerships with local colleges allow HEIs to provide a highly visible strategic demonstration of institutional commitment to widening participation without necessarily affecting grass-roots academic behaviour in the HEI (which may be rooted in selective student recruitment and a strong research culture).

Employer engagement

FE-HE partnerships are also seen as a key element within employer engagement strategies – in a number of ways:

- First, these partnerships enable HEIs to spread their subject range by offering, through franchising and validation, more vocational courses that are more attractive and relevant to local employers;

- Secondly, they offer a means of recruiting more local students who are more likely to form the jobs pool from which local employers recruit;

- Thirdly, they offer opportunities for more flexible, and even customised, delivery (for example, part-time, block, evening or workplace delivery which is more difficult to provide in an HEI environment for a number of reasons, customary, contractual and logistical).

For 'pre-1992' universities that offered a course portfolio of largely academic subjects (in particular, those with limited provision in science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and also more liberal arts-based 'post-1992' universities this aspect of FE partnerships is particularly important because their partner FECs are regarded as being much closer to employers. For most of 'post-1992' universities that do not feel the same deficit it was seen as strengthening and extending the scope of their existing work with employers.

Other drivers

These appear to be the major strategic drivers of FE-HE partnerships from the perspective of HEIs – legacy and overlapping provision; regional footprint; widening participation; and employer engagement. Almost entirely absent from this list is financial profit. Although the HEIs in the sample retained 20-25% of the income they received from HEFCE for students who were enrolled in franchised courses, they did so to cover the cost of providing student record, registry, assessment and examination and quality assurance services. In the case of validated courses simple cost recovery appears to be the norm. Some HEIs, in fact, claimed that they 'lost' money on their partnerships with FECs.

On the whole there appears to be limited distinction between franchised and validated courses in terms of strategic drivers. The same drivers apply to both, although their financial and management arrangements clearly differ. The main exception is that some HEIs seem to regard franchised courses rather like a header-tank. By franchising courses to FECs they create off-campus capacity that does not make the same demands in terms of buildings and equipment and also offers, at any rate potentially, more cost-effective delivery. Franchised courses can also be used to manage student demand – upwards and downwards. If students cannot find places on on-campus courses, they can be directed to equivalent franchised provision (especially in urban environments where travel-to-study distances are long and distances between HEIs and FECs short). However, even in the case of franchised courses, the four over-arching strategic drivers appear to take precedence over these more detailed factors.

4.3.2 Present provision and future plans

The pattern of HE provision in FECs reflects many of these strategic drivers. Most is sub-Bachelor, originally HNC/D but now predominantly FDs. Although there is a significant number of top-up programmes from FDs and even Bachelors' provision, most HEIs – 'pre-1992' and 'post-1992' universities alike – see HE-in-FE as predominantly a sub-Bachelor business catering for local students, many of whom are part-time and are also unlikely to be qualified for direct entry into 'mainstream' higher education. Even in the case of courses offered in both FECs and HEIs, for example FDs, there is usually a distinction in terms of the type and level of entry qualification. In this respect the views of HEI managers correspond to those of most FEC managers, that HE provision in HEIs and FECs is broadly complementary rather than competitive.

Although the White Paper reforms are still new, and perhaps not yet perhaps fully digested, there is little evidence from the interviews that these attitudes are likely to change in the near future. Although some HEIs have signalled a possible reduction in the number of indirectly funded places on franchised courses in their partner FECs, this has been in response to the overall reduction in student numbers to make room for the free market in AAB students and the creation of a 'margin' of 20,000 places for which lower-fee institutions can bid. Two of the HEIs in the sample plan to cut back on the number of courses they validate; one, arguably, in response to the more competitive climate created by the White Paper but the other in response to quality concerns and out of a desire to achieve greater regional focus.

Instead a longer-term dynamic seems to have been more influential. The increasing policy attention paid to HE-in-FE during the 1990s and 2000s has forced HEIs to adopt a more strategic approach to partnerships with FECs. More than one interviewee indicated that

previously their HEI did not really have a strategy at all. Other factors appear to have been the pressure to demonstrate more progress towards widening participation and various initiatives on employer engagement (in addition to the wider development of much more extensive HE systems that are more embedded in emerging 'knowledge societies', which has encouraged the greater distribution of HE delivery often in more flexible formats with greater emphasis on employability – a global rather than English, or UK, trend).

The emphasis on having a strategy has produced three main effects:

i) Greater emphasis has been placed on coordination – of various types of HE-in-FE, i.e. franchised and validated courses; but also of other forms of collaboration with FECs, for example in terms of progression agreements for potential students or business development initiatives with regard to local employers. The 'big picture' is now seen as more important;

ii) Consequently more effective management arrangements have been developed. Previously the concern of many HEIs was to offer academic registry and quality assurance services to support the, relatedly uncoordinated, initiatives of faculties and departments. Now more strategic and operational capacity has been created at institutional level;

iii) The effect of clearer strategy and improved management capacity has been to encourage institutions to focus their partnerships – either by establishing clearly articulated regional partnerships (in which the HEI is 'first among equals') or focusing on a smaller number of key FEC partners in support of a number of agendas, i.e. widening participation and improved progression, more distributed and flexible delivery or employer engagement and business development, rather than simply franchising and validation.

Against this background of present provision most HEIs appear to anticipating limited change, despite the potential impact of the White Paper reforms. One interviewee summed up this majority view: 'we hope things in the future will be as close as the way they have been in the past as possible'. The majority of HEIs in the sample are hoping to preserve their current stake – with the exceptions of some scaling-back of franchised numbers to reflect the overall cut in student numbers and those institutions which are planning to focus on a smaller number of FEC partners (a process that had generally been under way before the publication of the White Paper). However, there are longer-term worries about the impact of the Government's reforms – in particular, on their potential erosion of the stable conditions needed to build effective collaboration.

4.3.3 Fees and costs

Most HEIs are relaxed about FECs setting fee levels for courses they validate. This is seen essentially as a decision for the FECs. There appears to be no concern about confusion among potential applicants if different fees are charged for courses leading to awards made by the 'parent' HEIs. Nor does there appear to be significant concern about FECs charging fees that are too low to deliver the level of resources required to delivery HE programmes leading to HEI awards. Any concerns are addressed through the initial validation and continuing quality assurance arrangements. It is important to emphasise

that the management of differential fees is not a new experience in the context of many FE-HE partnerships.

In the case of indirectly funded, i.e. franchised, provision the picture is less clear-cut. The majority of HEIs prescribe the fee level, although usually after consultation with FECs. But a minority is happy to allow FECs to choose what fees to charge. Although joint bids for the additional 20,000 places were not allowed, in several cases there were informal discussions between validating HEIs and partner FECs about bids for the margin. As these bids were for directly funded provision, they sometimes involved varying the mix between directly funded and indirectly funded provision – or adding directly funded provision to HE provision that previously had consisted only of franchised courses.

The view in most HEIs is that, although the new fees regime will introduce new levels of uncertainty, their impact will be less than might be imagined – for two main reasons. The first is that, as has already been stated, differential fees are not unusual in the context of FE-HE partnerships. The second is that fee arrangements have always been kept under almost constant review. The general desire is to maintain open partnerships with FECs in which decisions about fees can be reached through discussion and negotiation.

However, some impacts can already been observed. For example, one HEI has decided to refocus its validation activities on a more restricted number of FECs in its own region. Although the main reasons for this change are related to strategic focus and issues of academic quality and the student experience, one reason is a desire not to be enable partner FECs to undercut HEIs in other regions.

As has already been stated, most HEIs retain a top-slice of between 20 and 25% in the case of franchised provision. However, all insist they are not making a profit from indirectly funded provision. In the case of validated provision all HEIs insist that their charges are calculated on the basis of cost recovery. There is general acknowledgement that costs are lower in FECs, mainly because of different cost structures (in particular, different staff contracts) but also because most courses are sub-Bachelor and students have different expectations. However, decisions about the appropriate level of resourcing are regarded as ones for FEC managers.

4.3.4 Academic quality, teaching and the student experience

None of the HEIs report any systematic problems about academic standards and the quality of teaching on HE programmes in FECs. In one case the fact that the grade profile of college students was different, with fewer receiving higher marks, was seen as evidence that standards were being maintained (and this different profile was justified by the greater ‘value added’ for college students). Any difficulties that arise are handled through standard procedures, typically annual course reviews the outcomes of which are reported through the HEIs’ quality assurance structures.

However, the majority of college provision is at sub-Bachelor level. In the case of some ‘pre-1992’ universities this is seen as not part of the core mission. So it is possible that different types of scrutiny are applied. In the case of ‘post-1992’ universities, of course, there is substantial in-house experience of teaching on FDs and HNC/Ds. In general the impression is of impressive levels of collegiality between HEI and FEI staff, and cordiality

between HEI and FEC managers. There are significant elements of cross-representation at Senate/Academic Board level – and also in terms of governance.

One major difference of opinion between HEIs appears to relate to whether it is necessary for the HEI to have in-house subject expertise before agreeing to validate programmes in colleges. In several cases this is not regarded as necessary:

- In some 'pre-1992' universities little correspondence was acknowledged between the largely academic undergraduate and postgraduate courses taken by well-qualified students in the HEI and the more vocational sub-Bachelor courses taken by students with less familiar entry qualifications in FECs. So the potential crossover of academic experience and subject expertise is seen as more limited. In these circumstances external experts are bought-in to serve on validation and review panels;

- However, one HEI (a 'post-1992' university) has decided to validate no sub-Bachelor programmes, i.e. Levels 4 and 5, unless there is a Level-6 top-up offered in the university. Most HEIs seem to be somewhere in-between, relying largely on in-house academic expertise but supplementing this expertise by bringing in external experts when necessary.

There is concern to support staff in FECs who teach on HE programmes. A wide variety of means are employed – including 'academic links' (named individual academics in HEIs), access to staff development, encouragement to enrol for higher degrees in the HEI, jointly organised guest lectures. In the case of the HEI that is refocusing its partnerships on FECs in its own region; one advantage is seen as the ability of college staff to access the university's facilities, physical and intellectual. One comment was that FE teachers are very focused on course delivery, and need to be drawn into a wider HE 'conversation'. However, there appears to be a tendency to tread carefully on delicate issues such as higher teaching loads in FECs.

There is general acknowledgement that the student experience in FECs is necessarily different – because of the different college environment but also, crucially, because of the different student portfolio. Typically students are believed to be taught for more hours and in smaller groups than would be the case in HEIs, which compensates for the more limited facilities available to them (and also for their more limited access to the wider 'hinterland' of a standard university experience such as Students' Unions, clubs and societies and a more intensive student culture/environment). Unlike FEC managers who resist a 'deficit' model in relation to students studying on HE programmes in their colleges, there seems to be a greater willingness in HEIs to talk of 'weaker' students (although this tends to be expressed in diplomatic language).

Overall it seems to be recognised that the different student experience is an issue that needs constant attention but is not a critical issue. However, the already well established trend towards refocusing partnerships on a small number of key (and probably local) FEC partners has been motivated to some extent by a desire to improve the student experience – which is likely to be further emphasised as the new funding regime of higher fees and, crucially, key information sets takes hold.

4.4 Summary and conclusions

4.4.1 Key findings with regard to FECs

These are:

- The bulk of current provision is complementary to rather than competing with provision in HEIs. The centre of gravity is generally at HN/FD level. Bachelors' courses typically take the form of top-ups to FDs, although standalone BA/BSc programmes are offered by both mixed-economy and specialist colleges;

- The principal rationales for HE-in-FE are 'legacy'; a strong employer focus; progression (for FE students on vocational pathways, although not necessarily for 'standard' 16-18 students on A-Levels and equivalent courses); and accessibility (for students who are less mobile for a variety of reasons);

- Most colleges are expecting to expand their HE provision (despite the fact that there has been little growth on overall numbers in HE-in-FE over the past decade). However few colleges anticipate significant shifts in their course portfolios as a result of their plans for expansion. 'More of the same/similar' is the best shorthand account of their current stance;

- In the majority of colleges no organisational distinction is made between FE and HE provision – except that (a) dedicated arrangements are made to manage HE (especially with regard to quality assurance); and (b) modest investment has been made in creating distinctive social (and teaching) space for HE students;

- The main differences between students on HE programmes in FECs and HEIs are perceived to be: (a) that the former are more 'local'; and (b) that they are more focused on vocational outcomes. However, there is a strong resistance to any suggestion that a 'deficit' model should be applied to HE-in-FE students;

- Relationships with partner HEIs are generally good. However there appears to be a vigorous 'market' in HEI partners with not infrequent changes (for both strategic and more specifically academic reasons). Links with HEIs are seen as conferring substantial academic credibility, as well as offering more practical benefits. The major complaint is about slowness of response when new programmes are proposed;

- The cost of providing HE programmes in FECs is perceived to be lower than in HEIs, although detailed cost comparisons are rarely available. The main factors contributing to greater economy are seen as (a) leaner management; (b) lower staff costs; and (c) more flexible employment contracts. But in all cases HE-in-FE was expected to make the same financial contribution as FE programmes; there was no appetite for regarding HE-in-FE as a 'loss leader';

- No major concerns were expressed about quality and standards that are perceived to be more than adequately assured by multiple levels of scrutiny (Ofsted inspections, IQERs undertaken by the QAA, validation and accreditation and FECs'

own quality systems). Links with partner HEIs are seen as generally developmental and collegial;

- Differences between the experience of students and the learning cultures of FECs and HEIs are acknowledged. It is recognised that HE students in FECs do not have access to the full range of experiences and facilities available to students in HEIs (although it is also asserted that because many are part-time and have clearly focused vocational ambitions these may be less relevant). On the positive side smaller class sizes and closer links with teachers are emphasised.

4.4.2 Key findings with regard to HEIs

These are:

- The major strategic drivers of FE-HE partnerships are (i) the legacy of existing links; (ii) regional footprint; (iii) widening participation; and (iv) employer engagement. Profit or income generation do not appear to be significant motives. Franchised provision has been used to manage demand – and so may contract as student numbers are restricted/reduced;

- Most provision, directly and indirectly funded, is at sub-Bachelor level, i.e. FDs (most) and HNC/Ds. Most HEIs see this provision as essentially complementary to their own on-campus courses, either because sub-Bachelor courses are not part of their core mission ('pre-1992' universities) or because they extend the HEI's footprint ('post-1992' universities);

- HEIs have increasingly adopted more strategic (and institutional) approaches to FE-HE partnerships, replacing the more bottom-up and ad hoc links that prevailed in the past (although personal relationships, especially between senior managers, remain crucial). These more strategic approaches have been supplemented by establishing more robust management arrangements; and have often led to a refocusing of FE-HE collaboration on a smaller number of key partner FECs;

- Relationships between HEIs and FECs are seen as characterised by collegiality (between groups of academic staff) and cordiality (between senior managers). Typically issues – such as setting fees – are resolved through a process of consultation and negotiation;

- Academic standards and teaching quality in FECs are not generally seen as an issue (or an issue that cannot be handled through routine validation and review procedures), although there is a greater readiness to accept a 'deficit' model of college students on HE programmes than there is among FEC managers. There is more concern about the student experience more widely, although it is accepted that there are legitimate differences between university and college experiences;

- HEIs value their partnerships with FECs that are often regarded as 'fixed' in principle (although variable in their details). Generally they are committed to acting as 'good neighbours'. They fear that one consequence of the White Paper may be to make collaborations more difficult. But their current stance is to maintain these partnerships – and, with one or possibly two exceptions, not to take any precipitate

action that might destabilise them. However, it is important to bear in mind the timing of some of the college visits, before the full implications of the new fees regime (and, in particular, the ability of institutions charging less than £7.5K to bid for 20,000 student places).

4.5 Conclusions

The overall impression gained from the interviews with senior managers in FECs is of HE provision that is both evolutionary, in the sense that substantial step-changes are not anticipated, but also adaptable and flexible, to changes in employer demands and student demand. In most cases it is not perceived to be in direct competition with HEIs. Minority views, of course exist. The Principal of a college with a large number of HE students said:

> *The FE-ification of HE has been clear for some time. Certainly with this Government universities are going to be pushed into behaving like FE colleges. But this was going on before. It has been visible to us for a long time.*

However it is seen as distinctive in a number of ways – for example, based on a strong dialogue with employers and also bringing HE opportunities to students who cannot access them through HEIs.

This impression is confirmed by the HEI managers who were interviewed. Typically partner HEIs that validate (or franchise) HE programmes in FECs believe that this enables HEIs to meet obligations to local students and employers that they would find it difficult to meet on their own – or it contributes to an integrated network of HE provision. Where HEIs have restricted their involvement in HE-in-FE it has often been in response to 'over-stretch' rather than out of a desire to curb the growth of this provision.

This impression of relatively stable and evolutionary provision may be substantially modified by the Government's current HE reforms which could prove to be a 'game-changer'. However, the nature of any changes is difficult to predict:

- In both FECs and HEIs the current stance appears to be one of 'wait and see', and a reluctance prematurely to disrupt arrangements that, on the whole are seen as working satisfactorily. Although frustrations undoubtedly exist, the 'rules of the game' are well understood on both sides.

We are just taking it 'a day at a time'. We know (we think) our customers; we know where we can drive costs out of the system if we have to compete more aggressively. Our strategy can't be more complicated than that.

- Also any changes in strategy and institutional behaviour may not be those that are currently anticipated. For example, the core-and-margin funding model may not drive down fee levels in HEIs as long as student demand is maintained. On the evidence of these interviews, most HEIs appear to be relaxed about partner FECs charging lower fees (on the grounds that they are addressing different and distinctive markets). Equally the, currently rather cautious, enthusiasm of FECs for degree-awarding powers may be increased, not because they anticipate heightened competition with HEIs but in the context of a substantial growth in private providers.

We are not frightened about competing with private providers in our markets, providing they have to achieve the same quality as we do.

5 Decisions and experiences of students[1]

5.1 Introduction

Policy discourses about higher education in further education, discussed in Chapter 2, posit distinct advantages of further education colleges over higher education institutions, in relation to:

- accessibility;
- flexibility both in terms of mode of delivery and in terms of responsiveness to demand;
- learning 'ethos' and environment such as small class sizes, more class contact time;
- the costs of the provision; and
- widening participation.

Broader debates about higher education students' choice also suggest that students make informed and rational choices about where and what to study. So within the context of students choosing to study at a further education college rather than a higher education institution, it might be expected that students opt for colleges because they are more accessible, provide more flexible courses that meet their needs and those of employers, offer a more intimate and supportive learning culture, are cheaper, and particularly attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This chapter aims to explore these issues and the extent to which they shape and inform student perceptions, and their higher education decision making and choices about studying at a further education college.

This chapter is based on the findings of the survey of 2,523 college students and 21 in-class discussion groups with students involving roughly 300 students. The overall aim of the survey was to provide insights into students' higher education decision making and choices, particularly why they decided to study at a college rather than a university or higher education institution, and their experiences of, attitudes towards, studying at a college.

The students surveyed were drawn from the 25 case study colleges, and an additional two colleges. The students were given a self –completion paper questionnaires which was

[1] Our thanks go to David Wilkinson from NIESR who undertook the survey analysis, but the views expressed are those of the authors.

distributed and collected in class by our researchers between October and December 2011[2].

A total of 2,764 college students completed the survey. Of these, 34 cases had to be discarded, and a further 207 were taking non-prescribed courses. Those taking these non-prescribed courses have been excluded from the analysis in this chapter.[3] This chapter, therefore, is based on 2,523 students who were studying towards a Bachelors degree, Foundation Degree, HNC/HND, DipHEs and CertHEs. The survey data were weighted by qualification aim, mode of study, gender, and age.

As discussed in Chapter 2, very little research has been conducted on the experiences of higher education students in further education, and those that have are somewhat limited in their scope. Nor, to the best of our knowledge, has research been undertaken which directly compares the experiences of higher education students studying in further education colleges with those studying in higher education institutions. Neither can this study, which focused exclusively on college students. However, we do call on the findings of two major studies of full-time (Purcell et al, 2008; 2009) and part-time (Callender et al, 2010; Callender and Wilkinson, forthcoming) students studying mainly in higher education institutions. By design, some of the questions used in the survey questionnaire for the college students are identical or similar to those used in both Purcell's and Callender's studies. So we can compare the decisions and experience of higher education student studying in different contexts. This gives a flavour of any similarities or differences. But these comparisons must be treated with caution given the very different methodologies employed by Purcell and Callender and other issues about the type of students they surveyed.

5.2 Outline of the chapter

The next section looks at the characteristics of the students surveyed and the courses they were studying. Section 5.4 focuses on students' higher education decision making and choice. It explores why students entered higher education, why they decided to take a course at a college rather than a university including their attitudes towards college and university higher education provision, why they chose their course and to study at their college in particular, while locating the findings within the broader policy issues regarding further education college's responsiveness to demand and accessibility. It concludes by examining the extent to which students were making informed choices. Section 5.5, then explores the realities of studying at a college, and students' experiences of studying. Section 5.6 concentrates on the costs of study, how students paid for their tuition fees, and whether the costs influenced their higher education choices and were a focus of concern to the students. Section 5.7 examines students' future plans. Finally, Section 5.8 examines, from the students' perspective, the extent to which college provision enhanced

[2] For further details of the methodology see Technical Appendix Chapter 9

[3] The number of students participating in the survey taking non-prescribed courses was lower than anticipated and consequently is unlikely to be representative of such students. It was decided to exclude these students from this chapter but report the unweighted findings separately in an Appendix Chapter 10, on Decisions and experiences of students on non-prescribed courses.

widening participation by providing a safe and encouraging learning environment and culture.

5.3 The characteristics of the students surveyed

5.3.1 Socio-economic characteristics of the students surveyed

Tables 5.1 to 5.7 provide some basic information about the students included in the survey. Table 5.1 shows that the majority of students surveyed were:

- female;
- white;
- single with no children;
- in paid employment;
- their highest entry qualification was two 'A' Levels or equivalent;
- non-traditional students whereby neither their mother and/or father had completed or was studying for an higher education qualification; and
- had some exposure to higher education because at least one of their brother or sisters, sons or daughters, partner or spouse, or other member of their household had completed or was studying for a higher education qualification.

Table 5.1: The Socio-economic characteristics of the Students Surveyed

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Male	1,196	47
Female	1,300	52
Not answered	28	1
Age		
20 and under	1,046	41
21 - 24	536	21
25 and over	893	35
Not answered	48	2
Ethnicity		
White	2,108	84
Mixed	70	3
Asian	121	5
Black	129	5
Other	62	2
Not answered	32	1
Family Type		
Single with no children	1,668	66
Single with children	154	6
Married with no children	304	12
Married with children	346	14
Not answered	51	2
Social Class of main income earner[1]		
Managerial and professional	1,224	49
Intermediate	218	9
Routine manual and service	846	34
Not answered	235	9
Employment status of student		
In paid work full-time	841	33
In paid work part-time	876	35
Unemployed but seeking work	324	13
Long-term sick or disabled	25	1
Retired from paid work	15	1
Looking after the home/family	89	4
Something else	192	8

Characteristic	N	%
Not answered	160	6
Highest entry qualification		
Postgraduate	58	2
Undergraduate or higher	402	16
2 "A" Levels or equivalent	1,695	67
GCSE or equivalent or lower	322	13
Not answered	47	2
Whether a traditional student[2]		
Traditional	862	34
Non-traditional	1,306	52
Don't know / not applicable / not answered	355	14
Whether exposed to HE[3]		
Exposed	1,414	56
Not exposed	884	35
Don't know / not applicable / not answered	225	9
Living arrangements		
Live alone	274	11
With parents	1,055	42
With partner/spouse and/or children	726	29
With friends/students in rented accommodation (not provided by university/college)	257	10
In university/college provided accommodation	157	6
Not answered	54	2
Identity[4]		
College student	403	16
University/uni student	1,023	41
By occupation/work	926	37
Parent	101	4
Not answered	70	3
All	2,523	100

1. 31% of respondents are the main income earner; 66% someone else is main income earner; and 3% of respondents did not answer the question.
2. A traditional student is defined as one who reports that their mother and/or father has completed or is studying for a HE qualification.

3. A student is defined as exposed to HE if at least one of their brother or sister, son or daughter, partner or spouse, another member of household or immediate family has completed or is studying for a HE qualification.
4. Identity is defined by response to the following question: "If you met a stranger at a party, how would you describe yourself?"

5.3.2 The course characteristics of the students surveyed

Table 5.2 shows that most students surveyed were:

- aiming for a Foundation degree;
- studied full-time;
- in their first year of study;
- taught mainly at their college rather than their workplace;
- on a course directly funded by HEFCE; and
- believed that their qualification was awarded by a university.

All the data in Table 5.2 were collected through the student questionnaires, except students' year of study and the source of course funding which was obtained directly from the colleges alongside information on students' qualification aim, their mode of study, and the awarding body for the student's qualification. Tables 5.3 to 5.5 compare the information provided by the survey respondents with that furnished by their college.

The largest disparities related to students' mode of study and their qualification awarding body. More students thought they were studying full-time and fewer part-time, when compared with their college's records (Table 5.4). This highlights issues associated with defining part-time study, the numerous different definitions used by various government agencies,[4] and a disconnect between formal classifications of mode of study and students' subjective experiences of studying. For instance, some students on HEFCE funded provision who were full-time were doing work related programmes and only attended college one day per week. This can be confusing for students, especially because the type of government financial support a student receives varies by their mode of study.[5]

In addition, perhaps not surprisingly, a sizable minority (12%) of students did not know who their awarding body was (Table 5.5). Of those students who thought they did know, fewer thought their qualification was awarded by a university than was the case.

[4] For a fuller discussion in relation to defining part-time study see Malcolm and Callender (2010)

[5] In the remainder of the report we have used the students' own, self-reported, definition of their mode of study rather than the college's classification.

Table 5.2: The Course Characteristics of the Students Surveyed

Characteristic	N	%
Qualification studying for		
Bachelor's degree	614	24
Foundation degree	1,297	51
HNC/HND	513	20
Diploma / Certificate of HE	48	2
Professional qualification	12	+
Other	19	1
Not answered	20	1
Awarding body		
My college	125	5
A university	1,689	67
BTEC/Edexcel	321	13
City and Guilds	15	1
Another organisation	38	2
Don't know	301	12
Not answered	35	1
Mode of study		
Full-time	1,635	65
Part-time	867	34
Not answered	21	1
Subject of study*		
Medicine, subjects allied to medicine etc	323	13
Physical sciences etc	316	13
Engineering and technology	420	17
Social studies etc	114	5
Business and administrative studies and Law	506	20
Creative arts and design	430	17
Education	310	12
Other and combined subjects	65	3
Not answered	37	1
Year of study		
1	1,475	58
2	735	29
3 or higher	278	11
Not available	36	1

Characteristic	N	%
Where mainly taught		
At a college	2,316	92
At place of work	101	4
Both	40	2
Not answered	66	3
Course funder		
Direct from HEFCE	1,359	54
Franchise from HEI	1,114	44
SFA	26	1
Not available	24	1
All	2,523	100

+ indicates that some respondents reported the answer, but it was less than half a percent of responses.

*subjects were grouped as follows:

Medicine & dentistry + subjects allied to medicine + veterinary science. agriculture & related subjects

Physical sciences + biological sciences + mathematical and computer sciences + architecture, building & planning

Engineering and technology

Social studies + mass communications and documentation + historical and philosophical studies + languages

Business and administrative studies + law

Creative arts and design

Education

Other + a combination of subjects

Table 5.3: Comparison of Student and Institutional reporting of qualification aim: Percentage of Students reporting qualification aim by the Institutional report of their qualification aim

	Institutional report					
	Bachelor's degree	**Foundation degree**	**HNC/HND**	**Diploma / Certificate of HE**	**Not available**	**Total (%)**
Student report						
Bachelor's degree	95	4	2	0	*	24
Foundation degree	1	94	2	0	*	51
HNC/HND	1	1	94	10	*	20
Diploma / Certificate of HE	1	+	1	70	*	2
Professional qualification	+	+	+	17	*	+
Other	2	+	+	0	*	1
Not answered	1	1	1	4	*	1
Total (N)	581	1,361	530	40	12	2,523
Total (%)	23	54	21	2	+	100

Base: All Students (N=2,523)

+ indicates that some respondents reported the answer, but it was less than half a percent of responses.

* indicates sample too small for reliable figures to be reported

Table 5.4: Comparison of Student and Institutional reporting of mode of study: Percentage of students reporting mode of study by the Institutional report of their mode of study

	Institutional report			
	Full-time	**Part-time**	**Not available**	**Total (%)**
Student report				
Full-time	96	19	*	65
Part-time	3	80	*	34
Not answered	1	1	*	1
Total (N)	1,505	1,001	17	2,523
Total (%)	60	40	1	100

Base: All Students (N=2,523)

+ indicates that some respondents reported the answer, but it was less than half a percent of responses.

* indicates sample too small for reliable figures to be reported

Table 5.5: Comparison of Student and Institutional reporting of awarding body: Percentage of Students reporting awarding body by the Institutional report of their awarding body

	Institutional report				
	College	**HEI**	**BTEC / Edexcel**	**Not available**	**Total (%)**
Student report					
My college	*	5	4	*	5
A university	*	80	3	*	67
BTEC / Edexcel	*	1	75	*	13
City and Guilds	*	+	1	*	1
Another organisation	*	2	0	*	2
Don't know	*	11	15	*	12
Not answered	*	1	1	*	1
Total (N)	5	2,099	407	12	2,523
Total (%)	+	83	16	+	100

Base: All Students (N=2,523)

+ indicates that some respondents reported the answer, but it was less than half a percent of responses.

* indicates sample too small for reliable figures to be reported

Some of the student characteristics presented in Tables 5.1 and 5.2 are inter-related and these relationships are important when interpreting the findings discussed below. For instance, the characteristics of students surveyed taking different qualifications varied significantly (Table 5.6). Just over a quarter of all students surveyed (25%) were aiming for a Bachelor's degree. Those taking a degree were most often women; under the age of 20; taking full-time and franchised courses in creative arts, business and administrative studies, and medicine and subjects allied to medicine; whose highest entry qualification was 2 'A' Levels or equivalent; and had part-time jobs.

Students studying for a Bachelor's degree also were far more likely than those aiming for either a Foundation degree or HNC/HND to be female; to be studying in creative arts, business and administrative studies, and medicine and subjects allied to medicine; to have an entry qualification at an undergraduate level or higher; and to be on franchised courses.

Over half (52%) the students surveyed were aiming for a Foundation degree. Those taking Foundation degrees were most frequently women; aged under 20; studying full-time on franchised courses in education; whose highest level qualification on entry was 2 'A' Levels or equivalent; and had part-time jobs.

Finally, one in five of all students surveyed were taking an HNC/HND. These students were most likely to be men; aged 20 or under; to be studying part-time; taking courses in engineering; whose highest level qualification on entry was 2 'A' Levels or equivalent; in full-time employment; and to be on directly funded courses. When compared with students taking other qualifications, they were far more likely to men, to be studying part-time and to be in full-time paid employment; and taking courses in engineering and physical sciences.

There were also some significant differences in the characteristics of full and part-time students (Table 5.7). Full-timers were more likely than part-timers to be women; aged 20 and under; to be single and have no children; to have part-time jobs or to be unemployed; to have started their course with 2 A levels or equivalent; to be aiming for a Bachelors or Foundation degree; to be studying creative arts; and to be on franchised courses.

Table 5.6: The Characteristics of Students and their course by qualification aim

Characteristic	Bachelor's Degree	Foundation Degree	HNC/HND	All
Gender				
Male	32	44	78	45
Female	68	56	22	55
Age				
20 and under	43	44	41	42
21 - 24	27	18	26	22
25 and over	31	38	33	36
Employment status of student				
In paid work full-time	17	33	65	36
In paid work part-	47	39	21	37

Characteristic	Bachelor's Degree	Foundation Degree	HNC/HND	All
time				
Unemployed but seeking work	16	15	8	14
Other	20	13	6	14
Highest entry qualification				
Undergraduate or higher	33	12	12	19
2 "A" Levels or equivalent	60	72	74	68
GCSE or equivalent or lower	8	15	14	13
Mode of study				
Full-time	83	73	31	65
Part-time	17	27	69	35
Subject of study[1]				
Medicine, subjects allied to medicine etc	22	13	+	13
Physical sciences etc	7	13	19	13
Engineering and technology	+	13	49	17
Social studies etc	5	4	2	5
Business and administrative studies and Law	24	18	22	20
Creative arts and design	31	16	5	17
Education	6	20	+	12
Other and combined subjects	4	2	2	3
Course funder				
Direct from HEFCE	44	55	66	54
Franchise from HEI	56	45	29	45
SFA	0	0	5	1

Table 5.7: The Characteristics of students and course by their mode of study

Characteristic	Full-time	Part-time	All
Gender			
Male	44	56	48
Female	56	44	52
Age			
20 and under	53	22	42
21 - 24	22	22	22
25 and over	26	56	36
Family Type			
Single no children	76	51	67
Lone parent	6	7	6
Married no children	9	18	12
Married with children	9	24	14
Employment status of student			
In paid work full-time	14	75	36
In paid work part-time	48	17	37
Unemployed but seeking work	20	2	14
Other	18	6	14
Highest entry qualification			
Undergraduate or higher	15	25	18
2 "A" Levels or equivalent	73	60	68
GCSE or equivalent or lower	12	15	13
Qualification aim			
Bachelor's Degree	31	12	24
Foundation Degree	58	41	52
HNC/HND	10	41	21
Other	2	6	3
Subject of study[1]			
Medicine, subjects allied to medicine etc	13	13	13
Physical sciences etc	13	12	13
Engineering and technology	8	33	17
Social studies etc	5	3	5
Business and administrative studies and Law	21	19	20

Characteristic	Full-time	Part-time	All
Creative arts and design	24	5	17
Education	12	14	13
Other and combined subjects	3	1	3
Course funder			
Direct from HEFCE	53	58	54
Franchise from HEI	47	39	44
SFA	0	3	1

5.4 Choices and decision making

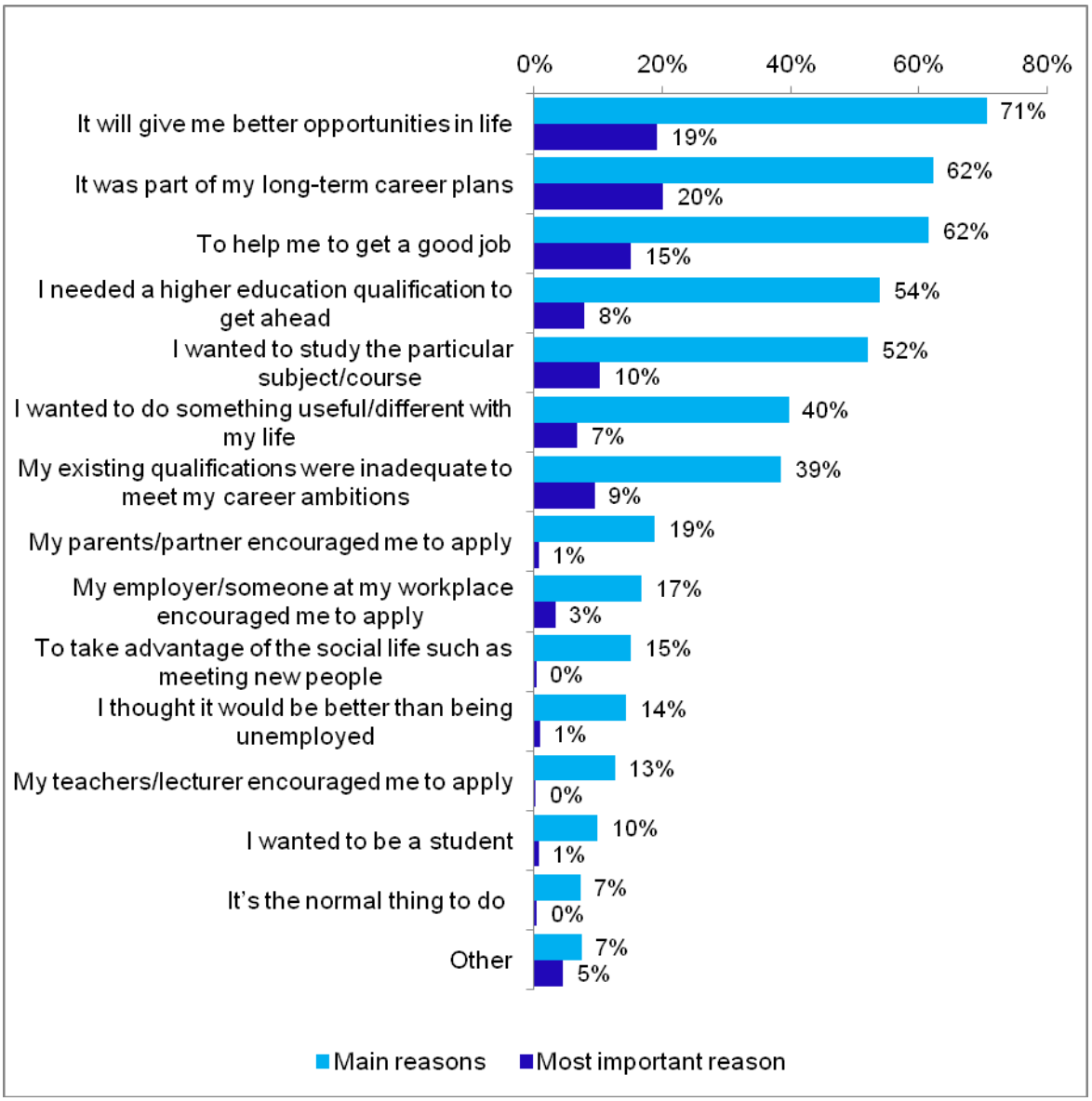
5.4.1 Reasons for entering higher education

Students' motivations for participating in higher education were primarily instrumental. They were concerned with improving their life opportunities (71%), getting a good job (62%), pursuing higher education as part of their long-term career plan (62%), needing a higher education qualification to get ahead (54%), and wanting to study a particular subject/course (52%) (Figure 5.1). Moreover, there was a large degree of consensus among the students surveyed in their reasons for entering higher education, with few significant variations among different student groups. However, younger students aged 20 and under and those studying full-time particularly stressed their desire for better opportunities, getting a good job, and wanting to study a particular subject/course.

Students' most important reasons for entering higher education, which drove their decision to enter higher education, were that higher education was part of their long-term career plan (20%), would give them better opportunities in life (19%), and help them get a good job (15%) (Figure 5.1). These were the most significant reasons for all student groups.

These findings were reiterated in the discussion groups with the college students. They also echo those from other studies of full and part-time undergraduates mostly studying at universities. However, for instance, in Purcell et al's (2008) study, full-time undergraduates placed greater emphasis on their desire to study a particular subject/course, while in Callender et al's (2010) study, part-time students stressed their desire to do something useful/different with their life.

Figure 5.1 Main reasons and most important reason for wanting to do higher education



Base: All students (N=2,523)

Percentages for the most important reason exclude 164 invalid responses (N=2,359)

5.4.2 Reasons for taking a course at a college rather than a university and their attitudes towards colleges and universities

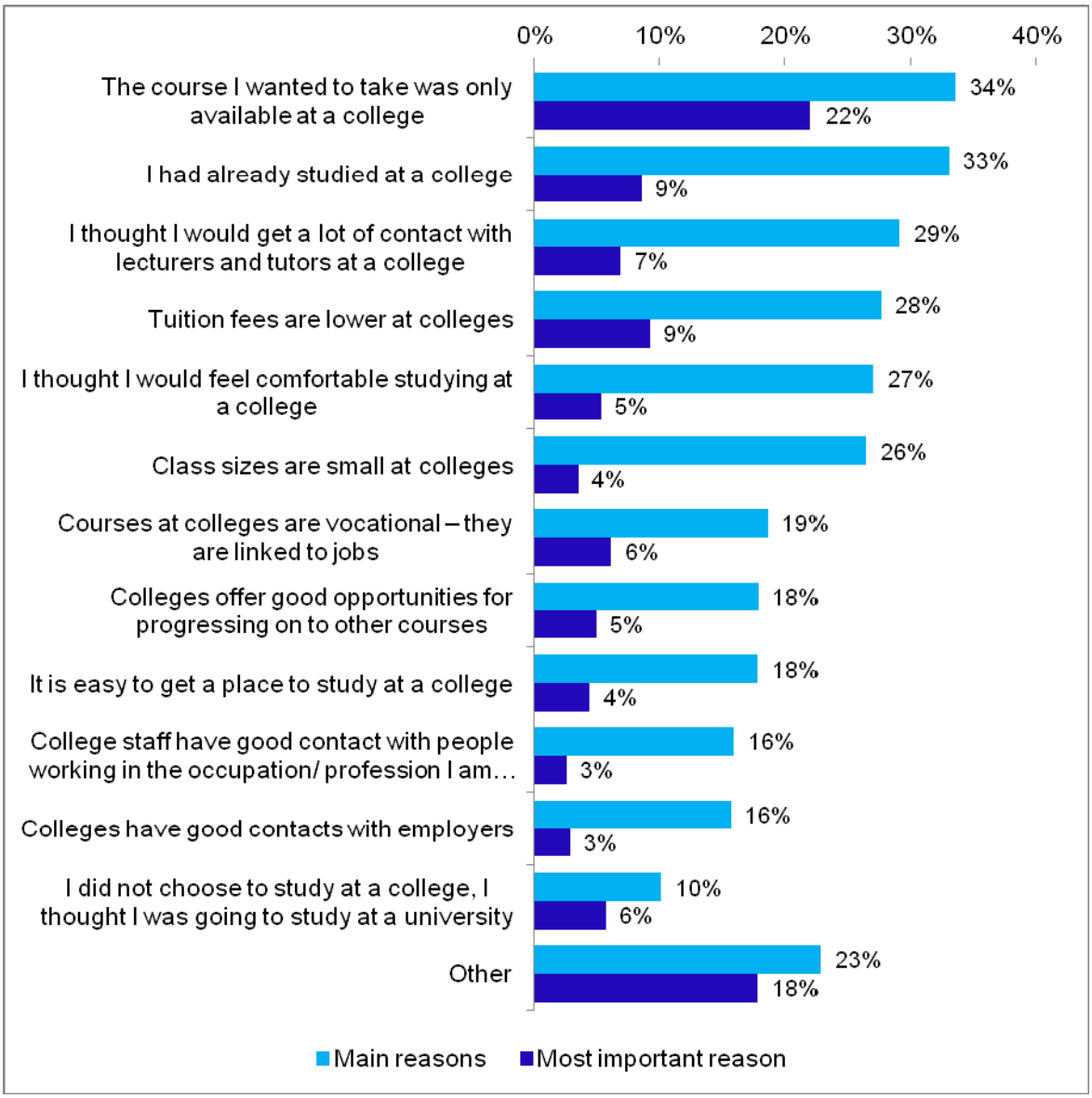
Students' reasons for studying at a college rather than a university were much more varied and diffuse compared with their reasons for entering higher education (Figure 5.2). The majority of students did not identify any single reason for studying at college rather than a university (Figure 5.2), suggesting that numerous factors influenced them. Students' five most popular reasons were associated with the college offer, and the familiarity and safety of colleges' learning environment. These included: the course they wanted to take only being available at a college (34%); having already studied at a college (33%); the larger

amount of contact with lecturer and tutors (29%); lower tuition fees at a college (28%); and they thought they would feel comfortable at a college (27%).

However, there was no dominant most important reason for students selecting a college over a university. Most often, students' decision to opt for a college was driven by their perception that the courses they wanted to take were only available at a college (22%) (Figure 5.2), suggesting that for a minority of students, colleges were fulfilling a niche role in terms of their offer.

There was no evidence that students were drawn to colleges as against universities because 'college staff have good contact with people working in the occupation/profession I am interested in', or because 'courses at college are vocational – they are linked to jobs' (Figure 5.2). Although students taking vocational qualifications, HNC/HND (22%) and Foundation degrees (21%), were more likely to believe this than those taking a bachelor's degree (11%). Furthermore, only a minority (17%) believed that 'colleges know better than universities what skills employers need', and the majority (59%) did not know or neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (Fig 5.3). This may be because students were largely unaware of such employer links. It certainly brings into question, from the students' perspective, the visibility of college's employer engagement – a prized feature of college as against university higher education provision. This could be an argument for involving students in the validation process, as suggested by some.

Figure 5.2 Main reasons and most important reason for deciding to take a course at a college rather than a university



Base: All students (N=2,523)

Percentages for the most important reason exclude 215 invalid responses (N=2,308)

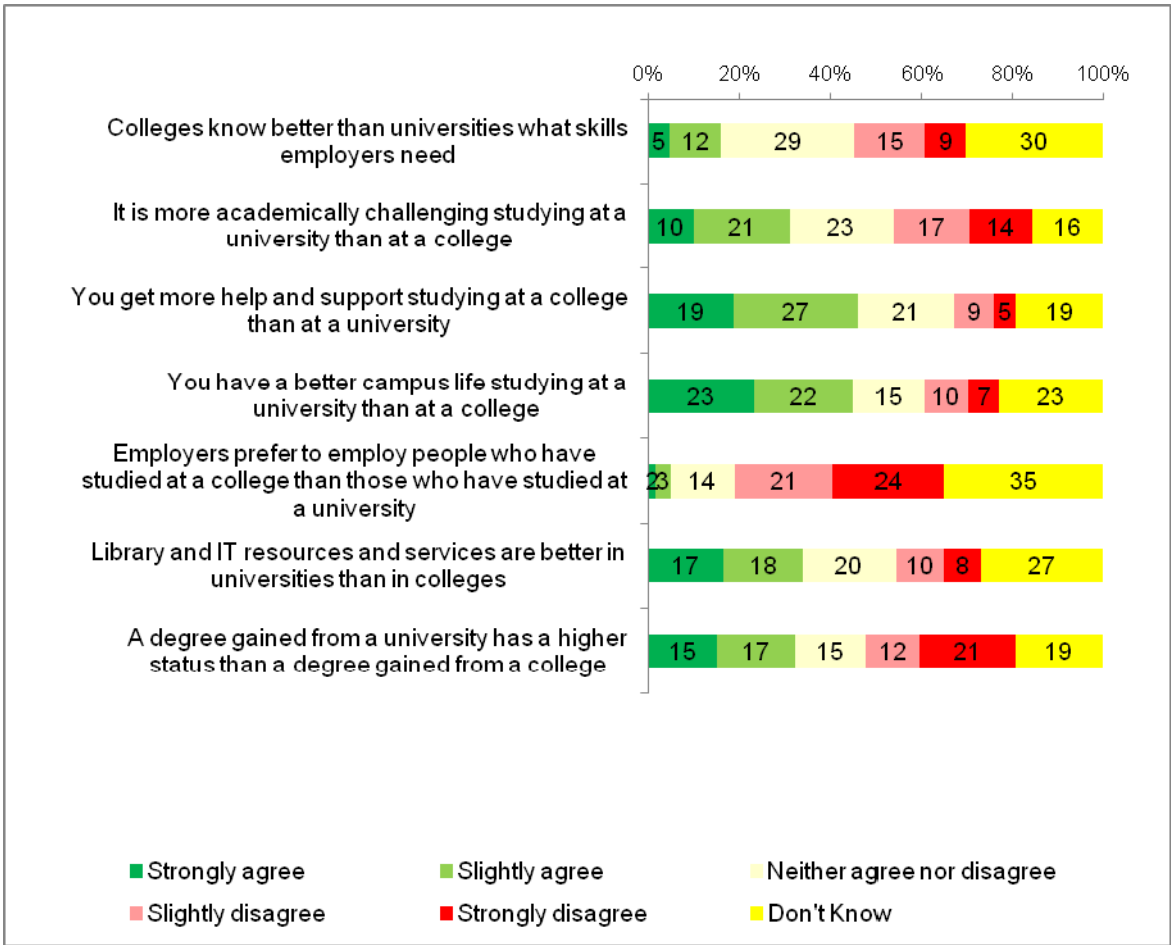
When asked to identify some of the other potential advantages of studying at a college rather than a university, or vice versa, between a third and over a half of the students surveyed were unable to do so either because they neither agreed nor disagreed with a particular statement, or did not know (Figure 5.3). And overall students did not hold strong views on the relative merits of university and college higher education provision. Of the most strongly held views, two suggest that universities offered better opportunities than colleges in terms of employers' preferences and campus life, and one favoured colleges – the help and support available to students.

First, looking at the employment consequences and prospects of studying at a college rather than a university (Figure 5.3). As we have seen, these drove students' decision to

enter higher education and as discussed below, largely determined their choice of course and college. Yet, only a very small minority agreed (5%) with the statement 'employers prefer to employ people who have studied at a college than those who have studied at a university', with students most often neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement or not knowing (49%). However, students were equally divided about whether or not 'a degree gained from a university has a higher status than a degree gained from a college' (32% agreed, 32% disagreed). Again, most frequently, students neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, or did not know (34%). And as we have seen, few thought colleges had better insights than universities into employers' skill needs. So there is little evidence of students perceiving colleges as giving them a labour market advantage compared with university graduates.

Turning to the experience of studying at a college rather than a university, here students' attitudes were more mixed (Figure 5.3). In colleges' favour, students most frequently agreed that 'you get more help and support studying at a college than at a university' (46% agreed, 14% disagreed). Conversely, in universities' favour, students most often believed that 'you have a better campus life studying at a university than at a college' (45% agreed, 17% disagreed). In addition, nearly twice as many students agreed (35%) rather than disagreed (18%) with the statement that 'Library and IT resources and services are better in universities than in colleges' but students were more likely to neither agree nor disagree with the statement, or not know (47%). This finding echoes those raised in the discussion groups with students, and in the National Student Survey, as discussed in Chapter 2. The NSS found that students taught in further education colleges' rate learning resources lower than those taught in higher education institutions (HEFCE, 2011). Students also were ambivalent about whether 'it is more academically challenging to study at a university than at a college' with equal proportions agreeing (31%) and disagreeing (31%), but most often they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, or did not know (39%). So there was limited evidence of students perceiving colleges as giving them a better learning and student experience than universities.

Figure 5.3 Differences between colleges and universities



Base: All respondents answering each question (N ranges from 2469 to 2479)

The discussion groups with students also confirmed that many students were unable to talk about any differences between universities and colleges because they had had no exposure to universities. Some were not interested when questioned, or could not understand the relevance of such questioning. They had only studied at a college and so had nothing to compare it with. As one commented, '*but we don't know what university is like*'. Some acknowledged that the experience of studying at a university might be different, but felt unable to comment on any variations. This helps explain why such a large proportion of the students surveyed answered that they neither agreed nor disagreed with a particular statement about the differences between colleges and universities, or did not know.

Conversely, it is an empirical questionable whether students studying at higher education institutions would be able to comment on college life. However, given the sizable proportion of students progressing into higher education institutions from further education colleges,[6] who would have taken their 'A' Levels or equivalent at a college, they probably

[6] Around 40% of entrants to full-time undergraduate education at HEIs acquired their entry qualifications at FECs.

would be better placed to have insights into college life and hence make an informed decision about opting for a higher education institution rather than a college.

When student groups did discuss the distinctive features of colleges and universities, it was very rarely based on their first- hand experience. Rather their views were informed by word of mouth, the experiences of their 'mates', or children, and what they had heard. Their opinions were not, therefore, based on 'hard' information provided by official source, or careers information, advice and guidance, they were purely subjective impressions.

For those who felt able to comment on the differences between a college and university higher education, there was an implicit recognition that colleges had a lower status than universities. Hence a recurring theme, for those on franchised courses, was the kudos and employment advantages of a university degree rather than a 'college' degree. The 'name' attached to the university was perceived as important generally. As one student argued 'people always ask where you got your degree from, so it must matter.' The lower status of a college-based degree was presented very vividly by one student group undertaking a foundation degree who declared they had no intention of telling prospective employers that they had studied for their degree at a college rather than at a university. They were simply going to say they had a degree from the University of X. Another group, studying for a BA in Fine Art, were aware that their college-based degree may have a lower status than a university degree. One group member said that it didn't matter because 'you're still coming out with a degree', but others contended there was a difference, and it mattered.

Regarding any differences in the learning culture and support available in colleges and universities, the discussion group students frequently believed that classes were larger in universities. Some students reasoned this meant that students studying at colleges received more attention and support from their tutors, and did not have to compete with others quite so much for attention and help, and that everyone knew each other better. However, for one student group, the small class sizes meant fewer opportunities for learning from each other. Some in their final year of a BSc in Podiatry thought they were being 'spoon fed' by tutors because they had chosen to study higher education in a further education college. They believed that they probably would have had to 'stand on their own feet' more, had they chosen a university. However, they were worried that they had become too reliant on tutors and were nervous about leaving the college environment and entering employment. Frequently too, students in the discussion groups imagined that the overall college environment was more intimate than that in a university. In a university students not only might get less time with tutors, but may have to book to see them whereas in a college '*you can just go down the corridor to see them*.' Some believed they were more likely to succeed in such a smaller, more intimate, environment.

In contrast, a student group studying for a BA in Fine Art recognised that universities might offer better opportunities in terms of the of the topics covered in their course and lecturers, and possibly in employment opportunities.

Another frequent theme in the discussion groups with younger students was about how they were missing out socially at their college, although this was not such an issue for older students. For instance, students at a college in Yorkshire complained that the college had no social life and no facilities for meeting outside the classroom. One commented: "*There is no social life here and nowhere to go. There is an old common room for students but it is always kept locked. We come into college, go to classes and then go home. We*

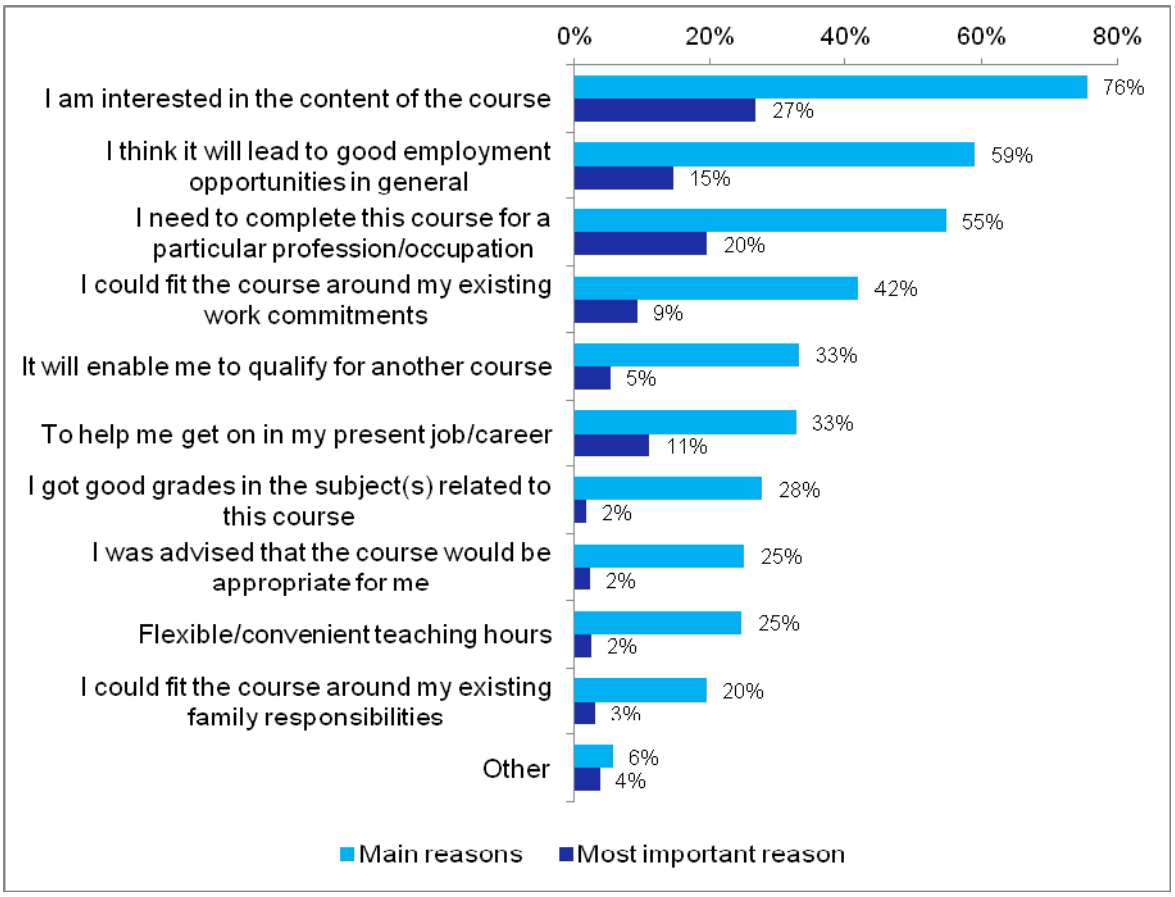
are isolated. The college has better facilities at its other, new [FE] site but we don't."
Another student group aiming for a first degree, thought they would have a much better social life if they gone to university and lived in halls of residence. However, another group studying for a foundation degree thought they were better off living at home. They associated being resident on a campus with a social life, and other distractions, which could have a detrimental effect on their studies.

Taken together these findings suggest a considerable lack of knowledge and awareness, and indifference about the claimed differences between universities and colleges amongst the students surveyed. The students surveyed seemed unaware of colleges' distinguishing features when compared with those offered by higher education institutions. They did not necessarily appreciate elements of the distinctive missions of colleges, as espoused in the interviews with college managers and their partner higher education institutions as discussed in Chapter 4, and in the literature discussed in Chapter 2. This was particularly the case in relation to colleges' employer engagement. This brings into question the extent to which students were actually making an informed choice when opting to study in a college rather than a university – an issue we will return to.

5.4.3 Reasons for selecting their course, and their particular college

Why did students choose their course and their particular college? The most popular reasons for choosing to study their course was interest in the course, and employment or career-related reason (Figure 5.4). The majority of students selected their courses because they were interested in its' content (76%); they thought it would lead to good employment opportunities in general (59%); and they needed to complete the course for a particular profession or occupation (55%). In addition, fitting the course around students' existing work commitments was another main reason identified by the majority of students studying part-time (66%), over the age of 25 (59%), those with children (62%), and employed in full-time jobs (66%).

Figure 5.4 Main reasons and most important reason for choosing the course you are on



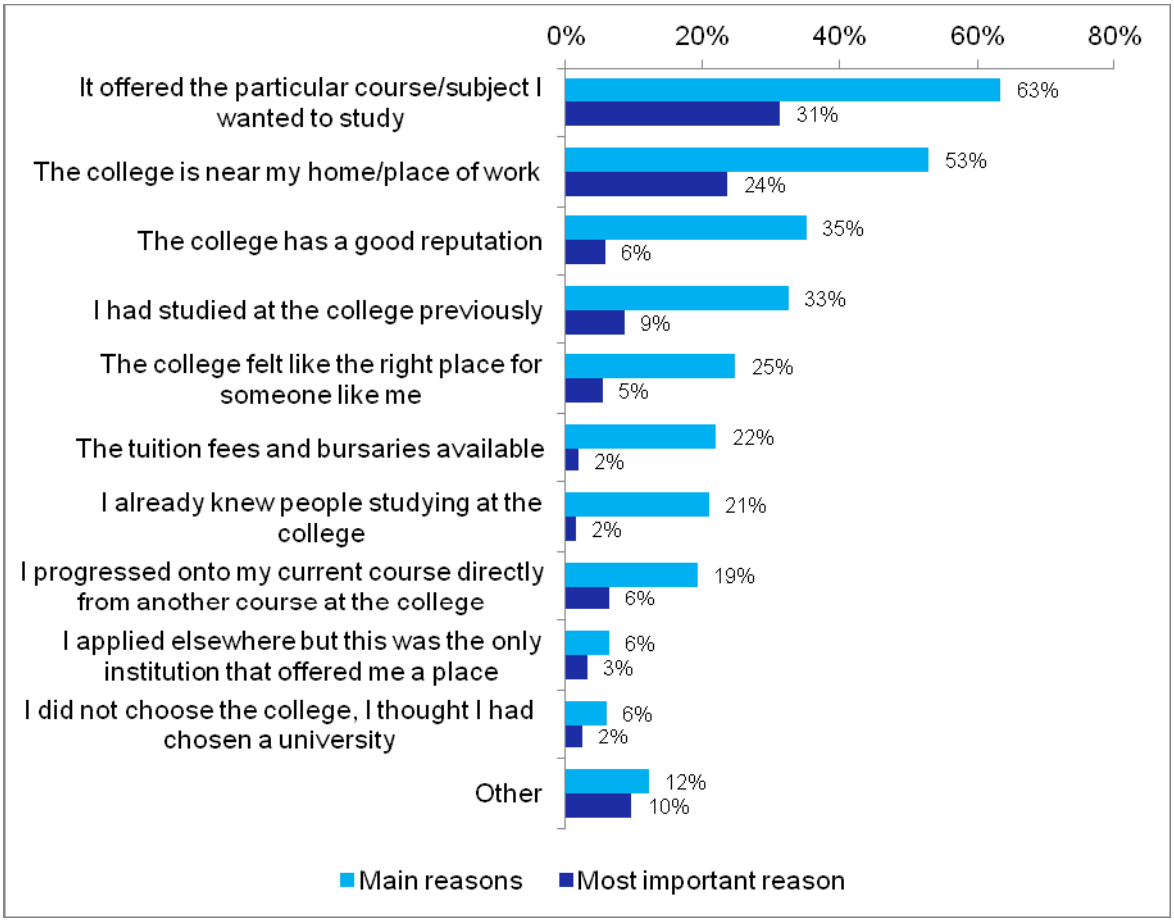
Base: All students (N=2,523)

Percentages for the most important reason exclude 137 invalid responses (N=2,386)

Overall, students' most important reasons for choosing their course were: their interest in the course (27%), especially for those taking a Bachelor's degree (33%), aged 20 and under (32%), and studying full-time (32%); and needing to take the course for a particular profession/occupation (20%) (Figure 5.4). Both were the most important reasons for all students groups. And they are largely the same main reasons given by university students when selecting their course of study at an higher education institution, such as those in Purcell et al's (2008 p 60) study of full-time university students and Callender et al's (2010 p 48) study of part-timers.

Turning to students' reasons for choosing the college where they were studying (Figure 5.5). The majority identified the following two reasons - their college offered the particular course/subject they wanted to study (63%), and the college was near their home/place of work (53% (Figure 5.5), which was especially the case for lone parents (65%), married students with children (61%), students aged 25 and over (58%), and those employed in part-time jobs (61%). Both these reasons also were most frequently identified as the most important ones by all student groups. This convenience factor was significant. The vast majority (80%) of students surveyed had less than an hour's journey to college, and most frequently (43%) their journey time was less than ½ an hour.

Figure 5.5 Main reasons and most important reason for choosing the college where you are studying now



Base: All students (N=2,523)

Percentages for the most important reason exclude 156 invalid responses (N=2,367)

All these sentiments were re-iterated in the discussion groups with students. For instance, some students opted for their college because it was the only place to undertake their course BSc in Osteopathy. Such a specialist course was only available at private, and more expensive, colleges. Some students taking a Foundation degree in Fitness and Health at a college in the North of England had all ruled out living away from home or commuting further because of the cost, or because they had family commitments. And these particular arguments were a recurrent theme in the student discussion groups, and were repeated on numerous occasions.

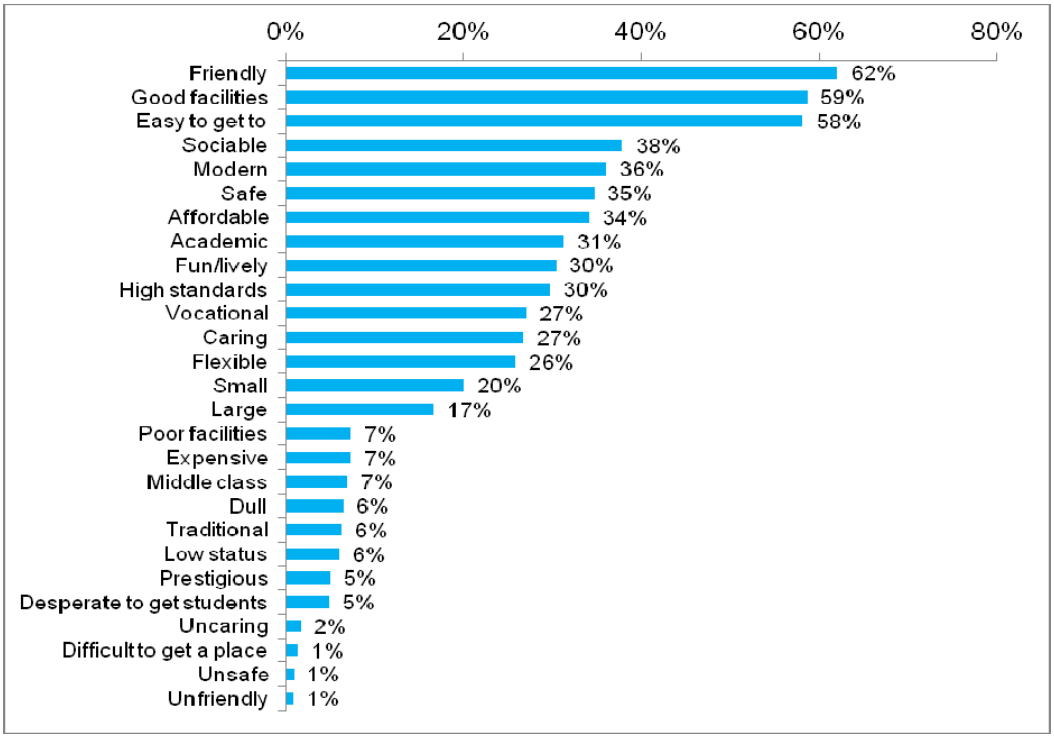
The reasons the college students surveyed gave for selecting their college do vary from those reported in other research on why university students chose their particular higher education institution. For instance, drawing on the Futuretract study of full-time university students, top of their list, just like their college peers, was that the higher education institution offered the particular course they wanted to study (Purcell et al, 2008 p46).[7]

[7] Note Purcell et al asked students about the reasons why they chose their particular higher education institution, but not their most important or main reason.

However, full-time university students placed far greater emphasis on the reputation of the higher education institution in general (around a half), than the full-time college students (41%) we surveyed. In addition, as far as the location of the higher education institution was concerned, university students were far more influenced in their choice of institution by whether it was in an attractive and interesting place than by whether it was near their home. In fact, a similar, but smaller, proportion of university students chose their higher education institution because they wanted to study away from home, and because they could continue to live at home (just under a third). By contrast, 52% of the full-time college students we surveyed mentioned their college's proximity to home as a reason for choosing their college. Most often the full-time college students surveyed lived at home with their parents (43%) and this rose to 62% for those studying full-time and aged 20 or under. The comparable figure for similar aged full-time university students was just over 20% (Purcell et al, 2009, p46).

When students were asked to characterise the college where they were studying (Figure 5.6), the majority rated their college: as friendly (62%) especially students under the age of 20 (67%), women (66%), those studying full-time (66%), and those taking foundation degrees (66%); as having good facilities (59%), especially students under the age of 20 (66%); and easy to get to (58%). A similar proportion of students described their college as vocational (27%), and as academic (31%). Predictably, students aiming for a Foundation degree were more likely than those aiming for a Bachelor's degree to describe their college as vocational (30% compared with 23%), but that was not the case for those studying HNC/HNDs (22%). And somewhat surprisingly, the Foundation degree students (35%) also were more likely to describe their college as academic than those taking a Bachelor's degree (31%) or HNC/HNDs (26%).

Figure 5.6 Student descriptions of their college



Base: All students (N=2,523)

To summarise, instrumental and pragmatic factors drove students' choices of which college course to take, and where to take it. This suggests that the case study colleges were responsive to student demand in terms of offering the courses students wanted to study – courses they were interested in, which students thought would lead to good opportunities and jobs, and as importantly, courses that were accessible because the college was close by, and so especially attractive to students wanting to combine study with full-time employment and with domestic commitments. The appeal of the localism of the college provision is what largely distinguished the factors influencing the higher education decisions and choices of the college students surveyed from similar students in other studies studying at higher education institutions. However, by students' own admission, they were not necessarily maximising their job prospects and opportunities by studying at a college rather than at a university. In addition, these findings bring into question the extent to which the students surveyed were actively deciding to study at a college rather than a university. Were they making an informed choice when opting for a college? It is to these issues that we now turn.

5.4.4 An informed choice?

Evidence from the survey sheds light on the extent to which students were actively choosing a college over a university.

Did students realise that they would be studying at a college and not a university?

When asked for their main reasons for deciding to take a course at a college rather than a university, one in ten students reported that 'I did not choose to study at a college, I thought I was going to study at a university' (Figure 5.2).There was no evidence that this proportion varied significantly by the college students attended. In other words, such confusion was apparent across the sector, rather than the result of one or two universities presenting misleading information, or students misinterpreting the information provided by just a few higher education institutions.

However, there were some variations in the extent of this confusion by students' characteristics. Some 17% of students studying towards a Bachelor's degree thought they would be studying at a university not a college, compared with just nine per cent of those aiming for a Foundation Degree and five per cent for an HNC/HND. And predictably, students studying full-time rather than part-time were more likely to be confused (13% compared with 4%). Associated with this, students applying for their course via UCAS, most frequently those taking Bachelor's degree (65%), were nearly three times as likely as those applying directly to their college to think they were heading for a university (14% compared with 5%). Similarly, students on franchised courses, again mostly those taking a Bachelor's degree (Table 5.6), rather than those on directly funded courses were also more likely to think they were taking their course at a university (13% compared with 8%).

The discussion groups with students gave some insights into how this confusion may have occurred, and students' reaction to their discovery that they were going to be studying at a college and not a university. For instance, some students in one group were initially confused about whether they were studying at a college or a university. They thought that because the campus was called a 'university centre' they were studying at a university. However, other students were quick to clarify that they were, in fact, studying at a college. Another student group, however, reasoned that because they were studying at a

'university centre', they were definitely at a university. So clearly, the title of a 'university centre' can only in part explain students' confusion.

Another student group discussed how they only realised that they would be studying at a college not a university in their first week. Both the students and their parents were shocked to learn they had ended up at a college instead of a university, especially one person who had turned down a place in clearing at another university, preferring the university they thought they would be attending. One student had got his school to write to the college to complain.

As suggested, the characteristics of the students surveyed who thought they would be studying at a university and not a college are interlinked. To disentangle which are the most significant factors we undertook some multivariate analysis to determine the characteristics of students and courses where such confusion was more prevalent. We estimated a probit model for the probability of reporting 'I did not choose to study at a college, I thought I was going to study at a university'. Such analysis aims to isolate the impact of particular factors on reporting the above reason, controlling for a wide range of other factors that also influence the reporting of the reason.

The results are reported in Table 5.8[8]. Students studying for a Bachelor's degree (compared with students studying for all other qualifications) were significantly more likely to have thought they would be studying at a university. Similarly students on franchised courses were more likely to have thought they were heading for a university rather than a college. Furthermore, students who had applied to study at a university but not other colleges, (apart from the one where they were studying), compared with students who had applied to other colleges (with or without some university applications) and those that had only applied to the college where they were studying, were also more likely to have thought they would have been studying at a university. Hence those students who most probably would have gained course information directly from a university website/prospectus were most likely to be misinformed. This suggests that universities need to provide far clearer information to students about where their franchised courses are delivered.

In the other direction, students who were studying on their first choice course or whose home or workplace was near the college were much less likely to report that they thought they would have been studying at a university. Perhaps because of the proximity of the college, these students were more familiar with the college and so were likely to be better informed.

[8] Similar analysis looked at two other questions:

- whether students reported "I did not choose the college, I thought I had chosen a university" as one of the main reasons for choosing the college where they are studying
- whether students knew that they would be studying at a college and not a university.

The factors associated with these responses were broadly the same as those reported in Table 5.8.

Table 5.8: Estimates of the probability of reporting that students thought they would be studying at a University rather than a college

Factors	Estimated marginal effects (standard error)
Qualification Aim (Relative to Foundation Degree)	
Bachelor's degree	0.038*** (0.013)
HNC/HND	-0.011 (0.015)
Other	-0.043*** (0.016)
Franchised course	0.033*** (0.010)
Other applications (Relative to none)	
Other Colleges only	-0.026 (0.016)
Other Universities only	0.071*** (0.017)
Both Other Colleges and Universities	0.010 (0.019)
On first choice course	-0.074*** (0.016)
College is near home / work place	-0.075*** (0.011)
Age (Relative to 20 and under)	
21-24	-0.026** (0.010)
25 and over	-0.006 (0.012)
Female	0.027*** (0.011)
White	-0.045*** (0.017)
Traditional Student	0.025** (0.012)
Studied Part-time	-0.035*** (0.013)

Robust standard errors in parenthesis

*** indicates p<0.01, ** indicates p<0.05, * indicates p<0.1

Other characteristics of students more likely to report that they thought they would have been studying at a university include women, students aged 20 and under, students from ethnic minority groups, students whose parents had a higher education qualification, and students studying full-time.

In addition, we found no influence on whether students thought they would be studying at a university by family type, social class, entry qualification levels and employment status. Whether they applied for the current course through UCAS or applied directly to the college also did not affect whether students thought they would be studying at a university. However, it should be noted that most students who had applied to universities were much more likely to have had applied through UCAS than other students, so any influence of applying through UCAS will be captured by including where else students applied to in the model.

These findings show that a significant minority of students – up to 17% of students studying towards a Bachelor's degree - were not making an informed or active choice to study at a college, in fact quite the opposite – they thought they were choosing to go to a university.

Alternative options: did students apply to study elsewhere - at universities and other colleges?

The extent to which the students surveyed applied to universities as well as a college may be indicative of whether they were choosing to study at a college in preference to a university. Table 5.9 shows that nearly two-thirds of students did not apply anywhere else apart from to the college where they are studying, almost three out of ten applied to universities and only a small minority applied to other colleges only.

Nearly four out of five students reported that the course they are doing was their first choice. This percentage was much higher for students who had only applied to colleges than students who had also applied to universities where three out of five said the course they were on was their first choice.

Almost nine out of ten students who did not apply anywhere else said that the course they were on was their first choice. For some of them, acceptance onto their first choice course explains why they did not apply anywhere else, but even for students who did not apply anywhere else it remains interesting as to whether they had a choice at all. Analysis of the survey questions does not allow us to fully explore whether the course was their first choice because they felt constrained as to where they could apply and hence it was the only place they applied to, or because it was genuinely the first choice course that they wanted to do.

Evidence from the student discussion groups did, however, shed some light on this question. Some students argued that, within their locality, nowhere else offered the course they wanted. However, a recurring theme in the group discussions was the way in which students' choices were constrained by their unwillingness, or inability, to leave home and their locality to study elsewhere either because of the costs of living away from home and/or the additional travel costs, or because of their work and domestic commitments. Indeed, as the Student Income and Expenditure Survey (SIES) demonstrates, full-time higher education students can save anything between £2,000- £3,000 per annum by living at home with their parents (Johnson et al, 2009). Moreover, for many of these college students, it was the living costs that were a barrier to moving away from home and attending a university, rather than the cost of tuition fees. As discussed further below (section 5.6), and as data from SIES reminds us, maintenance costs are currently double the costs of tuition. Consequently, many of these students in the discussion groups who

ideally would have liked to study elsewhere, argued that they had no viable alternative but to study at their local college, which by default was their first choice. In essence, they felt they had no choice, despite some realising they were missing out by studying locally.

Some of the students justified their choice. A mature student argued as follows. '*I was living in Essex and wanted to study in the area and so came here but I knew it had a good reputation. I'm not bothered about college versus university. I look at it like a job. Being professional*.' Another mature student living in Greater Manchester commented *'I could not have gone to Manchester, it's too far.'*

Table 5.9: Whether students applied to study elsewhere by whether their course was their first choice and their main reasons for choosing the college where studying now

	Did not apply anywhere else	Applied to other colleges only	Applied to universities	All
Where else applied %	64	7	29	100
Of which:				
Course first choice	87	82	59	78
Reason chose college studying at:				
Had studied at college previously	36	32	26	33
Progressed directly from another course at the college	23	13	14	19
The college is near my home/place of work	58	45	43	53

Base: All students (N=2,523)

For the students surveyed who applied elsewhere, particularly those that applied to universities, the lower percentage of students studying on first choice courses may reflect a failure to meet course entry criteria and hence attending a college may have been the only option open to them.

Indeed, in the student discussion groups the most frequent reason given for not going to a university they had applied to, was their failure to gain the required grades. Others did not have the necessary entry qualifications such as GCSE maths. Or, they had applied but been rejected. One student had rejected the idea of going to her local university because the course on offer was less applied than her college course. Another who had been offered a university place had chosen to come to the college, because he had heard from his friends that the college was smaller than the university. A few argued that their college had a better reputation than their local university.

One student, now taking an HND in Business explained why he attended a college. He had applied to a university but failed to achieve the 'A' Level grades the university required. His local college where he was now studying had been his '*fall-back position*.' He reasoned '*If I was going to university, this was the year because of the fees*'. He spoke

of friends who had gone back to re-sit their 'A' Levels and were resigned to paying the higher fees in 2012/13 for the university experience. He had rejected this option and intended to go to the local university to do the final year of the degree. He argued '*it's all the same in the end, but I'll finish that year ahead and with less cost*.'

Returning to the students surveyed, Table 5.9 does show some of the main reasons why students chose the college where they are studying. For more than one-half of students it was because the college 'was near my home / place of work'. This suggests that many students had a constrained choice dictated by where they lived or worked. Many more students who did not apply anywhere else (58%) reported location as a reason for choice of college than students who applied elsewhere (45% to other colleges and 43% to universities). The location of universities and colleges may restrict applications for a number of students, and as discussed above this was confirmed in the student discussion groups.

For one- third of students, their choice of their college was because 'I had studied at the college previously' and for one-fifth because 'I progressed onto my current course directly from another course at the college'. The desire for continuity of college study appears to restrict choice as students that applied elsewhere were again much less likely to report these reasons for their choice of college. And again this is confirmed in the discussion groups with students who opted for their college because they had already studied there. It felt safe and familiar, and students knew what to expect.

To further understand factors that influence where students applied, we conducted multivariate analysis of the probability that students applied elsewhere, and the probability that they applied to other colleges only, and the probability that they applied to other universities. As highlighted in the above discussion it is informative to distinguish between students that had applied to other colleges and universities. The aim of such analysis is to isolate the impact of particular factors on where students applied, controlling for a wide range of other factors that also influence where they applied.

The results are shown in Table 5.10. Column 1 shows the estimated influence of each factor on the probability of applying anywhere else. These estimates result from a probit model. Columns 2A and 2B shows the estimated influence of each factor on the probability of applying to other colleges only (2A) and universities (2B). These estimates result from a multinomial probit. Here a multinomial model is needed because we consider three possible options (do not apply elsewhere; apply to other colleges only; apply to other universities) whilst in the first model there are only two options (do not apply elsewhere; apply elsewhere).

The results discussed above are robust to controlling for other influences on where students applied. Students on their first choice course were much less likely to apply elsewhere and this was entirely because they were less likely to apply to universities. Students who chose their college because it was near to their home or place of work were also less likely to apply elsewhere and here they were less likely to apply to other colleges and universities; and students whose reason for choosing their college was because they had previously studied there, or had progressed on to their current course from another course at the college, were also less likely to have applied elsewhere.

Again the discussion groups shed some light on students' unwillingness to apply elsewhere. One student taking a foundation degree commented on how it was '*easier for me to stay [after taking a national diploma] and carry on here than to move somewhere else*.' Another in the same group commented *'Going to study at a university or somewhere else would feel like starting over, having to find out where facilities are and having to get to know people.'* A recurring theme was that travelling outside their immediate locality was too complicated and too costly, even a journey time of just 30 minutes to a nearby major city.

A few students realised they lacked the information to inform their choices. As one commented '*I feel there is a lack of career support and development to educate us about what courses offer us after we have finished. What jobs we could move into or further study*.'

Table 5.10: Estimates of the probability of having applied to study elsewhere

Factors	**Estimated marginal effects (standard error)**		
	(1)	(2A)	(2B)
	Applied anywhere else	Applied to other colleges only	Applied to other universities
On first choice course	-0.316*** (0.029)	0.004 (0.013)	-0.228*** (0.017)
Reasons for choosing the college where currently studying			
College is near home / work place	-0.101*** (0.022)	-0.023** (0.011)	-0.058*** (0.016)
I had studied at the college previously	-0.054** (0.026)	0.007 (0.013)	-0.051*** (0.018)
I progressed on to my current course directly from another course at the college	-0.080** (0.030)	-0.036** (0.016)	-0.026 (0.023)
Reasons for taking a course at a college rather than a university			
It is easy to get a place to study at a college	0.049* (0.029)	0.032** (0.013)	0.003 (0.020)
Class sizes are small at colleges	0.078*** (0.025)	0.012 (0.012)	0.049*** (0.017)
I did not choose to study at a college, I thought I was going to study at a university	0.114*** (0.036)	-0.038** (0.019)	0.107*** (0.023)
Qualification Aim (Relative to Foundation Degree)			
Bachelor's degree	0.052** (0.024)	0.0009 (0.013)	0.036** (0.016)
HNC/HND or Other	-0.080*** (0.031)	0.022 (0.014)	-0.094*** (0.024)
Age (Relative to 20 and under)			
21-24	-0.103*** (0.025)	-0.009 (0.015)	-0.069*** (0.019)

Factors	Estimated marginal effects (standard error)		
25 and over	-0.191*** (0.027)	0.002 (0.015)	-0.155*** (0.021)
Married	-0.101*** (0.028)	-0.002 (0.028)	-0.088*** (0.022)
White	-0.120*** (0.034)	-0.026* (0.015)	-0.063*** (0.022)
Traditional Student	0.080*** (0.024)	0.018 (0.012)	0.047*** (0.016)
Entry Qualifications GCSE or equivalent or lower	-0.049 (0.033)	0.020 (0.015)	-0.065*** (0.024)
Studied Part-time	-0.156*** (0.030)	-0.041** (0.016)	-0.086*** (0.024)
Employed Full-time	-0.099*** (0.031)	0.038** (0.015)	-0.133*** (0.023)

Robust standard errors in parenthesis

*** indicates p<0.01, ** indicates p<0.05, * indicates p<0.1

Our modelling suggests that a number of factors reported as reasons for choosing to take a course at a college rather than a university were also important in deciding where else to apply. Students who thought it easy to get a place at a college were more likely to have applied elsewhere, but only to colleges. In addition, students whose reason to take a course at a college rather than a university was because ‘class sizes are smaller at colleges’ were more likely to have applied elsewhere and to have applied to universities. It is likely that some of these students could have studied at a university but perceptions of class sizes influenced their decision.

Interestingly other reasons for choosing a college rather than a university that relate to colleges’ employer engagement and their learning environment such as ‘colleges have good contacts with employers’, ‘courses at colleges are vocational’, ‘I thought I would get a lot of contact with lecturers and tutors at a college’, ‘I thought I would feel comfortable studying at a college’ were not significant in determining whether the students also applied to universities, so appeared less important considerations in students' choices of where to apply. Students who thought they would be studying at a university were also more likely to have applied to a university mirroring the finding in Table 5.8.

Students studying for a Bachelor's degree and students whose parents had a higher education qualification were more likely to have applied elsewhere; to universities, but not just to other colleges. Older students, married students, White students, students with low entry level qualifications, who are studying part-time and employed full-time, were less likely to have made other applications, generally because they were less likely to have applied to universities.

In addition we found no influence on whether students applied elsewhere by gender, family type, social class, entry qualification levels and employment status.

5.4.5 Summary and conclusions

Student motives for entering higher education were primarily instrumental: they wanted to improve their life chances and job prospects. These employment and career related reasons, alongside interest in their course, were also why they selected their course. They selected their college mostly because of the courses available and it was near their home or place of work.

However, it is questionable the extent to which the students surveyed were making an informed choice when opting to study at a college rather than a university because most had no, or very limited, experience of universities, and they were largely unaware or indifferent to what they could offer. Nor were they particularly drawn to colleges because of the purported distinctive missions of further education colleges compared with higher education institutions, especially in terms of colleges' employer engagement activities.

The findings from our multivariate analysis clearly confirm that a minority of students were not choosing to study at a college rather than a university, quite the opposite, they thought they had applied to study at a university rather than a college. This raises issues about the clarity of the information provided by universities in their prospectuses and on their websites, given that those who had applied to other universities, who were taking Bachelor's degrees, and on franchised courses were most likely to be confused about where their courses were to take place, after controlling for various factors. For this student group, their choices certainly were not informed, instead they were misinformed.

For other students their choices were often limited and highly constrained, even where the college they were attending were their first choice. Students who selected their college because it was near their home or place of work, or because they had progressed from another course at their college or previously studied at the college were far less likely to apply elsewhere to study. While some were making a positive informed choice to study at their particular college, others were restricting their options and choices, consciously or unconsciously. Those limiting their choice to their local college, as we have seen in the discussion groups, were often hindered by their material and social circumstances which constrained their options. Those influenced by their previous exposure to a college environment, did not look beyond the college horizon, and may not have been encouraged to do so, or have had limited access to information on alternative options. Whatever the reason, they did not appear to see they had other choices, and thus may have limited their opportunities too. For these two groups, it is questionable therefore if they are making informed choices.

Others students had broader horizons and did apply to study elsewhere. Those most likely to apply to universities were aged under 20, single, white, and came from families where at least one parent had had some experience of higher education. For some of these students the choice to study at a college rather than a university may have been a positive one as they genuinely had a choice between a college and a university. For these students, what attracted them to a college over a university was the smaller college class size. None of the other college features, such as college's learning environment or employer engagement activities were a strong lure to study at a college rather than at a university. For others who applied to a university but not gone to a university, they rarely had a genuine choice. According to the student discussion groups, these students most frequently had failed to obtain the required university entry requirements. They had no choice but to go to a college if they wanted a higher education.

5.5 Experiences of studying and attitudes to study

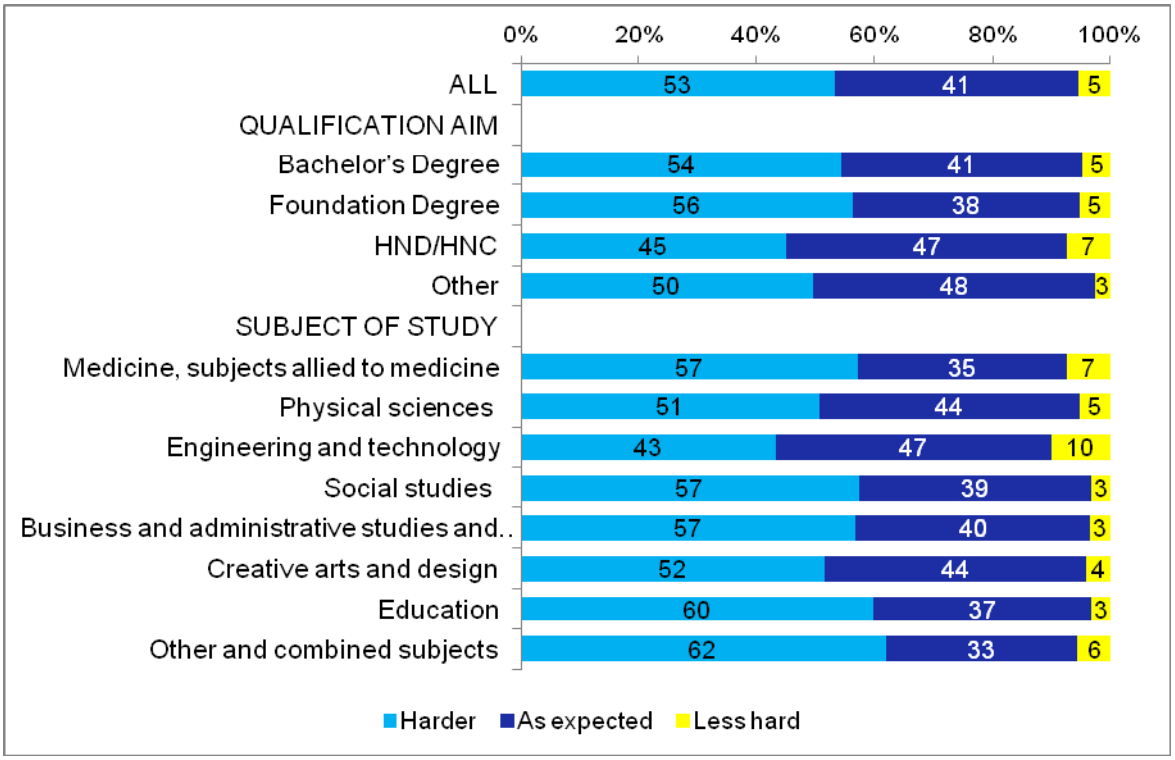
5.5.1 How hard students had to work

So what were college students' actual experiences of studying? The vast majority (94%) were taught mainly at their college rather than at their place of work. Just over a half of students surveyed (53%) had to work harder than they expected, and for 41% the level of work was as expected, just 5% had to work less hard than expected. Students taking an HNC/HND were less likely to say that they had to work harder than expected (45%) than students taking a Bachelor's Degree (54%) or Foundation Degree (56%) (Figure 5.7).

Engineering and technology students were the least likely to say that they had to work harder than expected (43% of them did so). Roughly three out of five engineering and technology students were taking an HNC/HND. They were also twice as likely to report that they had to work less hard than expected (10%) than other students (5%).

Students studying combined subjects (62%), Education (60%) and Medicine or subjects allied to medicine, Social studies, Business Administration and Law (all 57%) had a higher than average percentage of students that had to work harder than they expected (Figure 5.7).

Figure 5.7: Whether students had to work harder or less hard on their course than expected



Base: All students, excluding those providing multiple answers and non-respondents (N=2,458)

5.2.2 Hours of study

Those studying full-time had an average of 16 hours a week of 'face-to-face contact with teaching staff at college and/or at work', and spent an additional average of 14 hours on

'independent study'. The equivalent hours for those studying part-time were 9 and 10 respectively (Table 5.11). Among full-time students there were some interesting differences by students' subject of study. Most notably was that those taking engineering courses had the highest contact hours and those studying education the lowest.

Table 5.11: Average hours of face to face contact time and independent study by mode of study, by qualification aim and subject

	Study full-time		Study part-time	
	Face to face contact hours	**Independent study hours**	**Face to face contact hours**	**Independent study hours**
All	16	14	9	10
Qualification aim				
Bachelor's degree	16	16	10	10
Foundation degree	16	13	9	12
HNC/HND	16	12	9	7
Subject of Study				
Medicine, subjects allied to medicine etc	17	15	10	9
Physical sciences etc	16	12	9	9
Engineering and technology	22	13	10	7
Social studies etc	15	12	*	*
Business and administrative studies and Law	14	13	10	13
Creative arts and design	17	17	*	*
Education	12	14	7	8
Other and combined subjects	16	15	*	*

Base: All students (N=2,523)

* indicates too few observations for reliable estimates

Broadly comparable data from other studies on full and part-time students' hours of study who study mainly at universities can be used as comparators. For instance, Purcell et al's (2009) study of full-time undergraduates at higher education institutions, reported that students normally spent an average of 15 hours each week in timetabled lessons, tutorials, practical work, or other activities supervised by a lecturer or other academic staff. In addition, full-time students spent a further average of 13 hours each week on other non-timetabled coursework or study related to their course. These results are similar to those of other research on full-time students' hours of study (Bekhradnia, 2009). [9] Callender and Wilkinson's (forthcoming) study of part-time undergraduates shows that part-timers were

[9] Students were asked 'How many hours of time-tabled sessions did you have scheduled in an average week during term-time?' and also the size of their teaching groups.

spending the same amount of time per week on independent study as their full-time peers, but had only an average of six contact hours a week.

So to summarise, full-time college students had just an hour's more teaching a week than their full-time peers in higher education institutions, and also spent an additional hour on independent study per week. Part-time college students had more teaching contact hours than their part-time peers studying in higher education institutions but spent less time on independent study. None of these differences in teaching contact hours were substantial. This brings into question, again, one of the apparent distinctions in the provision of higher education courses in further education colleges and higher education institutions, concerning the supposed greater teaching contact time at further education colleges, as suggested in policy discourses and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. It also raises issues about the extent to which colleges offer better value for money than universities. , As we will see (section 5.6.1), there is only a small price difference in the level of tuition fees charged by colleges and higher education institutions for full-time students taking a Bachelor's degree.

5.5.3 Attitudes to study

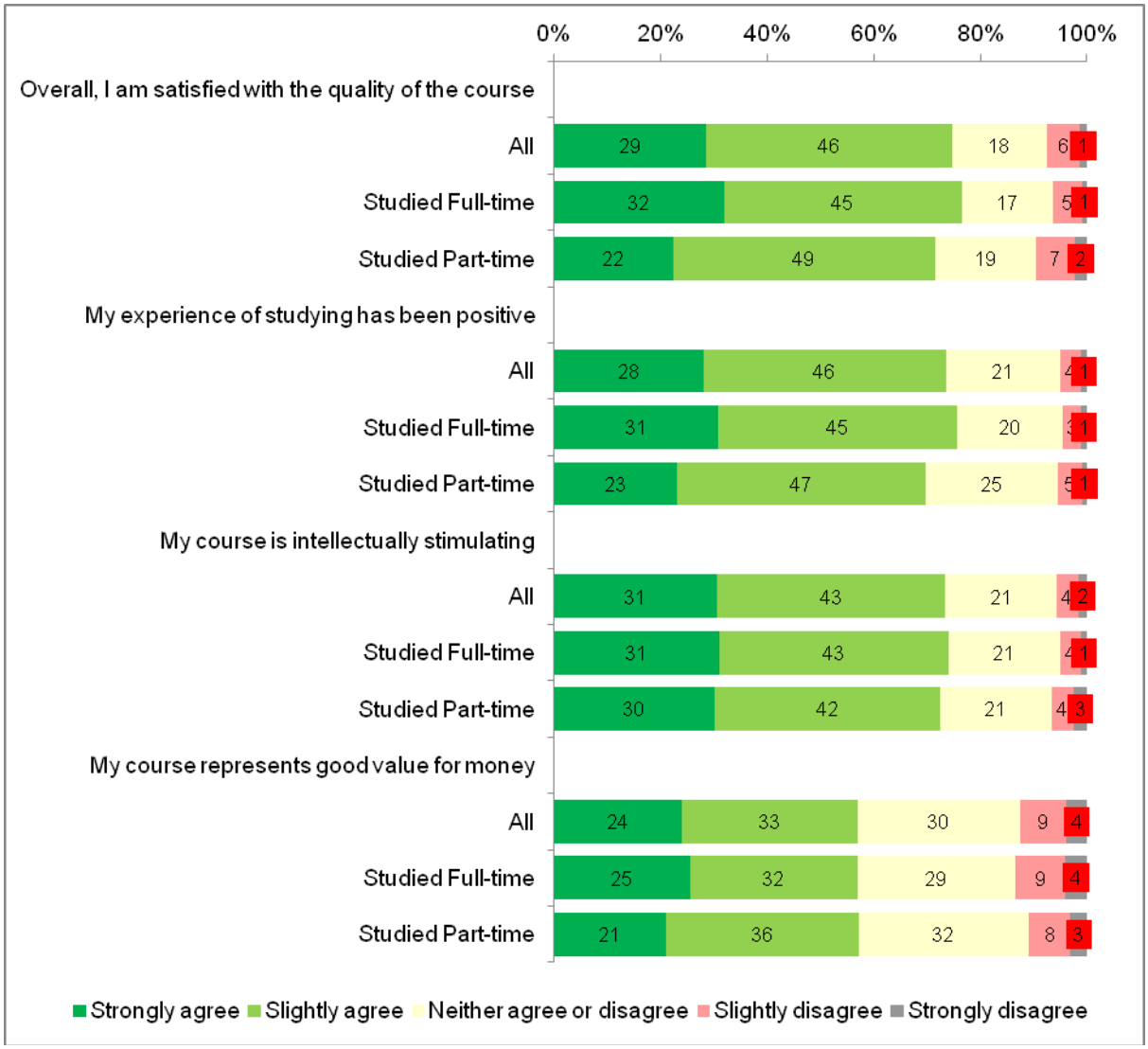
Turning now to the attitudes towards study and the educational experiences of the students surveyed (Figures 5.8a, 5.8b, 5.8c). Generally, students had positive teaching and learning experiences in terms of their overall college experience; their assessment of the college environment; and their individual daily experiences of being a student and in terms of the teaching and learning help and support they received. There were few significant differences between student groups except by their mode of study, especially in relation to their daily experience of studying.

Regarding students' overall college experience (Figure 5.8a), the majority were content and agreed with the following statements:

- 'I am satisfied with the quality of the course' (75%);[10]
- 'my experience of studying had been positive' (74%);
- 'my course is intellectually stimulating' (74%); and
- 'my course represents good value for money' (57%).

[10] According to the National Students Survey, in 2010, 76% of students taught in colleges in England were satisfied with the overall quality of their courses compared to 81% in HEI (HEFCE, 2011).

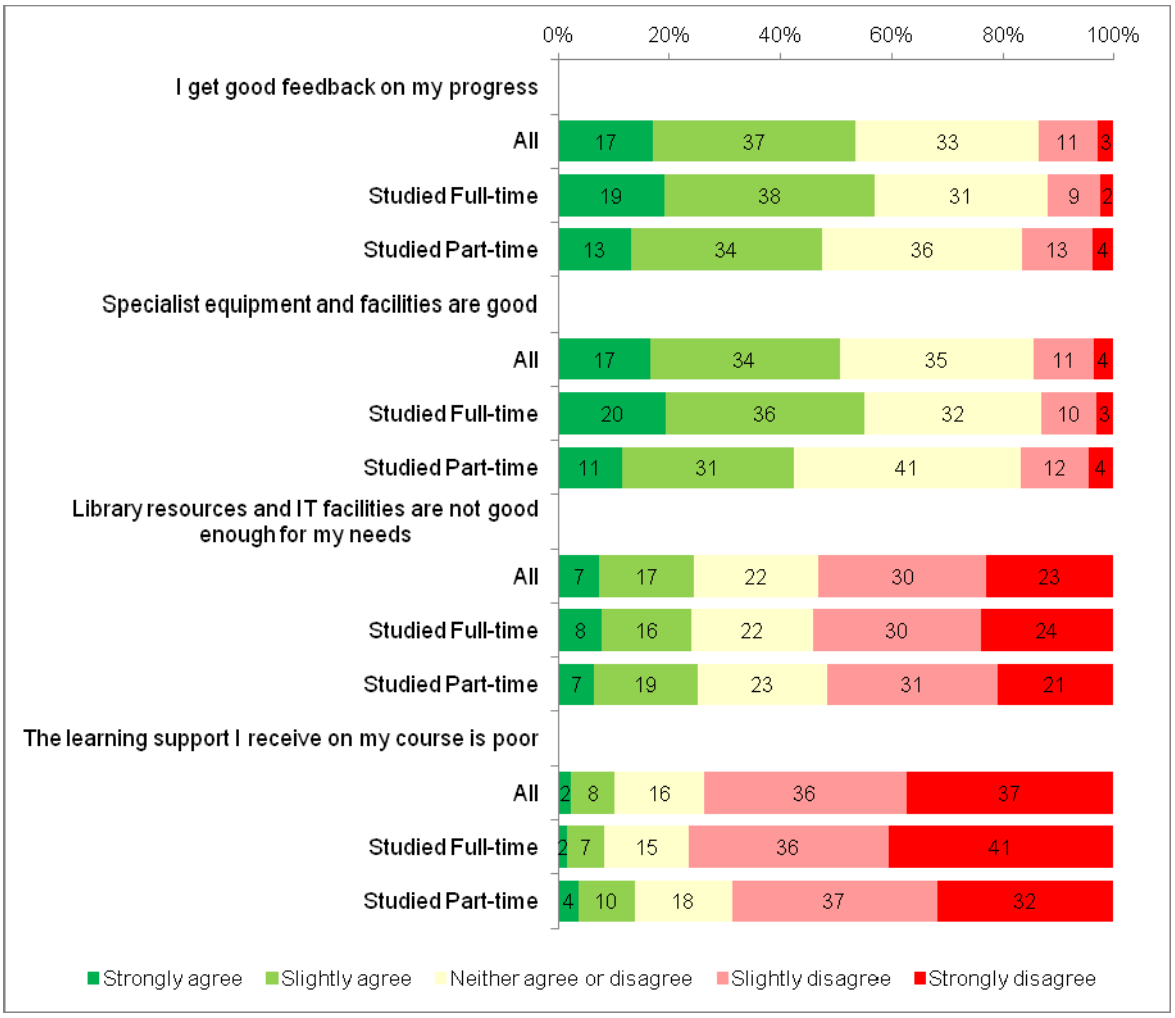
Figure 5.8a Students overall college experience by mode of study



Base: All students (N varies by question from 2,464 to 2,486)

Students' evaluation of the college environment was more mixed (Figure 5.8b). Just over half disagreed with the statement 'library and IT facilities are not good enough for my needs' while a similar proportion agreed that 'specialist equipment and facilities are good' but part-time students were less likely to agree then their full-time peers (FT=56%; PT 42%).

Figure 5.8b Students overall college environment by mode of study

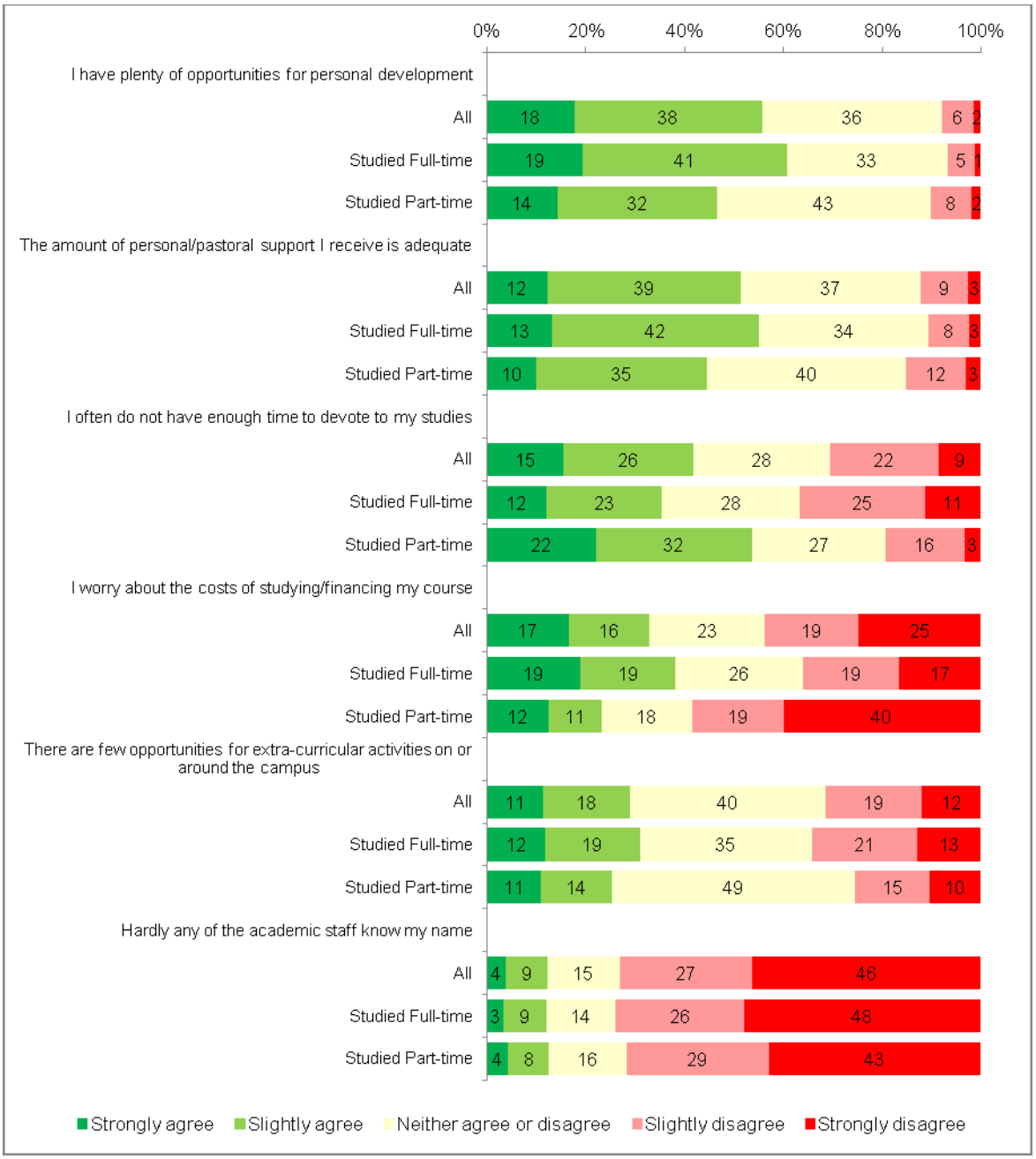


Base: All students (N varies by question from 2,465 to 2,478)

And these resource issues cropped up in the discussion groups with students. For instance, a student group taking a BA in Graphics wanted much longer opening times to access the library and IT facilities. Some specifically remarked that it would be easier if they could come in and work at weekends – like in a university. Other students on a Foundation degree course in Media Make-up were able to use their university's library. They were not allowed to take any books out of the library but did have on-line access to resources.

Returning to the students surveyed, their individual daily experiences of being a student varied (Figure 5.8c). Certainly, the colleges, which usually had small class sizes, provided quite an intimate learning experience with the vast majority (73%) of students surveyed disagreeing with the statement 'hardly any of the academic staff know my name'. However, this appeared to be the expense of a broader higher education student experience - those less tangible aspects of the student experience in a typical higher education institution - with only a minority disagreeing (31%) and agreeing (29%) with the statement 'there are few opportunities for extra-curricular activities on or around the campus', and just over half (56%) agreeing that: 'I have plenty of opportunities for personal development'.

Figure 5.8c Students overall daily experiences by mode of study



Base: All students (N varies by question from 2,434 to 2,486)

Overall, students studying part-time tended not to have such good experiences as their full-time peers in terms of teaching, learning and personal support. As we have seen (Table 5.7), the majority of part-timers were 25 and over, had full-time jobs, were married, and had children, unlike full-timers. They had to juggle these work and domestic commitments around their studies. Consequently, part-timer students were far more likely than full-time students to agree with the statement: 'I often do not have enough time to devote to my studies' (54% compared with 35%) (Figure 8c).

To what extent were the case study colleges able to help out part-time students, given these competing pressures and additional responsibilities outside of their studies? Part-

time students were significantly less likely than their full-time peers to agree that 'I get good feedback on my progress' (47% compared with 57%) (Figure 5.8.b) and that 'the amount of personal/pastoral support I receive is adequate' (45% compared with 55%) (Figure 5.8c). However, part-timers were only slightly less likely than full-timers to disagree with the statement 'the learning support I receive on their course is poor' (69% compared with 77%) (Figure 5.8b).

Again we can compare college students' rating of their teaching and learning experiences with those mainly attending universities drawing on the Futuretract studies of full time (Purcell et al, 2009 p.23) and part-time students (Callender and Wilkinson, forthcoming p 37). In those areas were comparable questions were asked, there were few major differences in relation to the overall university experience compared to the overall college experience. For instance, Purcell et al (2009) show that 62% of the full-time students studying in higher education institutions agreed with the statement 'I was given good feedback on my progress' compared 57% of the full-time college students we surveyed (Figure 5.8b). Some 80% of the full-time university students agreed with the statement 'on the whole, the tuition and learning support I received on my course were excellent' while 77% of the full-time college students we surveyed disagreed with the statement 'the learning support I receive on my course is poor' (figure 5.8b).[11]

Callender and Wilkinson's (forthcoming p 37) study of part-time university students shows that 80% were 'satisfied with the quality of the course', compared with 71% of part-time college students (Figure 5.8a). Two thirds of part-time university students agreed with the statement 'the learning support received on their course was excellent' while, as we have seen, 69% part-time college students disagreed with the statement 'the learning support I receive on their course is poor'.

However, there were larger differences regarding the learning environment and elements of the daily student experience for those at universities and those at the case study colleges. According to Purcell et al (2009) and Callender and Wilkinson (forthcoming p 38), both full and part-time university students rated their library and IT resources more highly than the college students surveyed – a finding echoed by the Nation Student Survey (HEFCE, 2011). For example, Purcell et al's (2009) study of full-time students at higher education institutions found that 86% of students agreed with the statement 'I had sufficient access to web-based facilities' while 75% disagreed with the statement 'library resources are inadequate' (Purcell et al, 2009 p 23). This compares with 54% of full-time college students who disagreed with the statement 'library and IT facilities are not good enough for my needs' (Figure 5.8b). Callender and Wilkinson (forthcoming) found that over two-thirds of part-time university students agreed that 'library resources are adequate', and that 60% agreed they had sufficient 'access to web-based facilities'. This compares with 52% of part-time college students who disagreed with the statement 'library and IT facilities are not good enough for my needs' (Figure 5.8b).

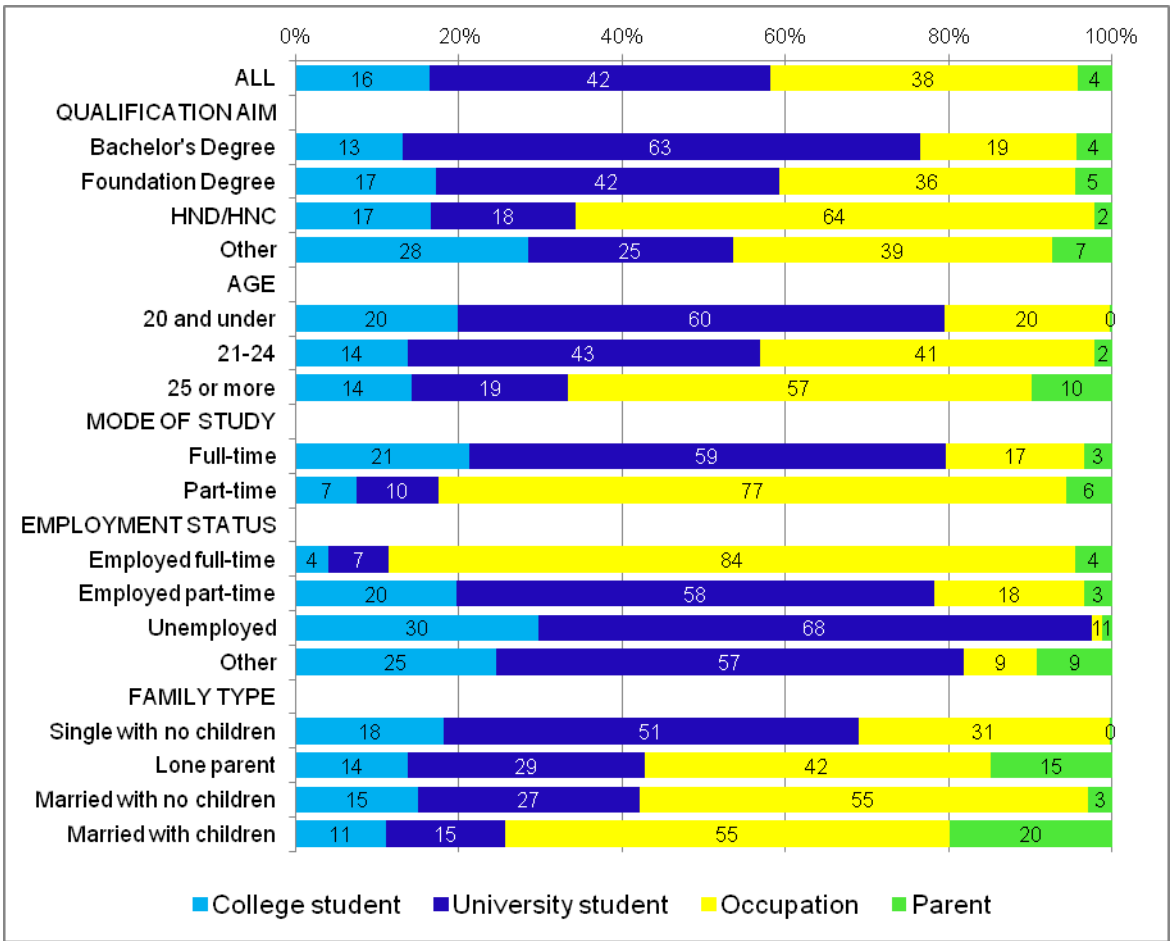
[11] Note some of the questions posed in Prucell et al's study and in Callender and Wilkinson's study were phrased in positive terms and others in negative terms, as was the case in the survey of college students. This needs to be taken into consideration when comparing any differences between university and college student attitudes. Moreover, it is for this reason that the reported difference may relate to the proportion agreeing to a particular statement or the proportion disagreeing.

Turning to the daily experience of being a student, both Purcell et al's (2009) and Callender and Wilkinson (forthcoming p 38) studies suggest differences between university students and the college students. For instance, some 69% of full-time students in Purcell et al's study agreed with the statement 'There were excellent opportunities for extra-curricular activities on or around the campus', while as we have seen (Figure 5.8c) only a minority of college student disagreed (31%) with the statement 'there are few opportunities for extra-curricular activities on or around the campus'. Callender and Wilkinson (forthcoming) found that two-thirds of part-time university students agreed they were 'given good feedback on their progress' compared with 57% of the part-time college students we surveyed (Figure 5.8b). Just over half (54%) of part-time university students disagreed with the statements 'the amount of personal/pastoral support I received was inadequate' while 27% agreed. Among the part-time college students we surveyed, 45% agreed that 'the amount of personal/pastoral support I received is adequate' while 15% disagreed. In contrast, the vast majority of college students (74% of full-time and 72% of part-time) surveyed thought the academic staff at their college, knew their names. This was the case for only a minority of full time students at higher education institutions (46%) (Purcell et al, 2009) and just over half of part-timers (51%) (Callender and Wilkinson, forthcoming). This is probably because university students were taught in far larger classes than college students.

5.5.4 Student identity and contact with their validating university

Students were asked 'if you met a stranger at a party, how would you describe yourself?' (Figure 5.9) Perhaps, somewhat counter-intuitively, given that all students surveyed were attending a college, they most frequently (42%) responded that they would introduce themselves as a 'university student', especially those taking a Bachelor's degree (63%), aged 20 and under (60%), studying full-time (59%), and who were unemployed (68%). The next most common response to this question was that they would describe themselves by their occupation; by the paid work they did (38%). And this was especially the case amongst those working full-time (84%), studying part-time (77%) aiming for an HNC/HND (64%), aged 25 and over (57%), and who were married with and without children (55%). In other words, a large groups of students did not identify with the notion of being a student, especially, where they had an alternative occupational identify to call upon. Moreover, only a small minority identified with being called a 'college student' (16%) but those who were unemployed were most likely to identify with this label (30%).

Figure 5.9: Students identity by qualification aim, age, mode of study, employment status, and family type



Base: All students, excluding those providing multiple answers and non-respondents (N=2,455)

The discussion groups with students revealed mixed responses about the extent to which they identified with their university, and the extent and nature of their links with their validating university. However, it should be recalled that a student's partner university was sometimes a substantial distance from the college the student attended. And for these students, it was rarely feasible for them to use their university's facilities because of the distance and the costs of getting to the university. For others, for instance, for a student group taking at BA in public services at a college in South East England, their nearby university 'loomed large'. They were able to use their university's library and saw themselves as the University of X students but studying at X college. Another group studying for a BA in Business Enterprise also strongly related to their nearby validating university and the branding of their university played an important role in their college.

Others in the discussion groups felt very different. Students taking a BA in Graphics at a college in the North of England close by their validating university had no links with their university. Indeed, one student stated that '*the university didn't know the course existed.*' These students did not feel like university students, and commented *'we feel alienated from the university scene in the City'*. This was particularly an issue with the 1st year students at this college who had wanted to have some sort of Fresher's event and, as students of the university, to be able to take advantage of visiting bars and clubs in the

City to access a better social life. Moreover, these students did not feel the college had a higher education ethos either, although it had a higher education hub, but it could only accommodate about 40 students comfortably. As a result, and despite the fact that there were about 700 higher education students in the college, these students did not know any other higher education students, only those on their course, and so felt their social life was limited and it was hard to meet other higher education students.

College students studying at other colleges had similar experiences with no links with their validating university, unable to use their universities' facilities, and no joint social events with their university. Students at a college in the South West of England felt they were considered second class in terms of the partner university. They never saw anyone from the university, and were not included as part of the graduation ceremony at the university. They felt a bit '*overlooked'* by the university and *'forgotten'*.

Another student group studying a subject allied to medicine at a Midlands college reported they did not have the same level of access to resources and the library as those students studying on the site of their validating university (e.g. no access to journals). They could not understand why this situation had arisen, and felt that they had been treated unfairly by the university. Apparently, the college had been somewhat surprised by the university's unwillingness to allow students access to basic academic resources and had sought to address these issues, but without success. Consequently, these students perceived that the relationship between their college and their university as strained. They also suggested that further education colleges' and higher education institutions' relationships would be further strained in future by increased competition for students, and financial pressures arising from new student funding arrangements. They questioned the long-term sustainability of these partnerships.

However, there was also evidence from some student group discussions, that students studying near their partner university did not use their university's facilities and resources even when they were at the students' disposal. This led one group, taking a foundation degree in a London college, to suggest that their university fees should be reduced because they were not using their university's facilities.

As we saw in Chapter 4, the extent to which the case study colleges had separate facilities for their HE students varied. And so did the experiences of students in the discussion groups. One student group at a college in Gloucestershire rarely mixed with other further education students because they had their own library, bars, halls of residence, and administrative centre. So students argued it felt like a university campus with a Fresher's fair, social activities and even balls. Others, at a college in the Midlands, complained about the lack of a designated space for higher education students. They reported that the library/resource centre was generally full of noisy teenagers and *'disruptive kids running about'*. The students indicated that they would welcome a separate study space for higher education students but knew that this was unrealistic because of pressure on space and financial resources. They felt that a university would have facilities, and an atmosphere, more conducive to higher education level study.

5.5.5 Summary and conclusions

To summarise, clearly, college students' overall college experience was positive, just like those who were studying in higher education institutions. However, their assessment of the college environment and their individual daily experiences of being a student, including the

help and support they received, was more mixed, and was not as good as those of university students, reported in other research studies. These findings confirm those from the interviews with college managers discussed in Chapter 4, who acknowledged that students in further education colleges do not have access to the full range of experiences available in higher education institutions – in particular with regard to extra-curricular activities but also in terms of access to the full range of learning resources. And this was confirmed in the student discussion groups by their often very limited contact with their partner university, including using their universities' resources. Although students most frequently identified with the label of 'university student', where they had an alternative occupational identify to call upon, they opted for that instead. Consequently, only a small minority identified with being called a 'college student'.

The experiences of the part-time college students surveyed were certainly not as good as those of their full-time peers, or those of part-time students studying in higher education institutions. Indeed, the survey findings suggest there is scope for our case study colleges to provide their part-time students with greater personal support and feedback than they currently receive. In addition, these colleges' support structures appear to be geared more successfully towards the needs of younger full-time students than those studying part-time. In turn, this brings into question, the responsiveness of the case-study colleges to the realities of students' desire for flexible study and for combining study with full-time employment – a feature colleges pride themselves on as part of their broader agenda of providing flexible higher education vocational provision, and an acclaimed distinctive feature of further education provision (Chapter 2).

On the other hand, it is also clear that the case study colleges offered their students a more personal learning environment than may be available to students in higher education institutions, as indicted by the fact that the majority of college students surveyed thought their lectures and tutors knew their name, unlike their higher education institution peers in other studies. As the interviews with our case study college managers discussed in Chapter 4 suggested, students in further education colleges are taught in smaller groups in an environment with which they may already be familiar and/or which may be less threatening to those who come from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

However, other evidence suggests that some of the espoused differences between colleges and higher education institutions may not be as great as suggested. For instance in relation to teaching contact hours, and the overall college experience.

5.6 Costs of studying and concerns about the costs

5.6.1 Tuition fees

Among the students surveyed, full-time students' tuition fees were on average £2,804 in 2011/12, while the average tuition fee for those studying part-time was £1,373 (Table 5.12). There was some variation in the fees of both full and part-time students by their qualification aim, subject of study, and whether the course was directly or indirectly funded. Students studying for a Bachelor's degree had higher fees on average than students studying for other qualifications. Engineering and technology students had much higher full-time fees than students of other subjects, but part-time fees were below average. Full-time fees for Education students were the lowest and part-time fees for Education students were also below average.

Students who said that one of the main reasons for deciding to take a course at a college rather than a university was because tuition fees are lower at colleges reported lower average fees than students who did not see this factor as important in their decision to study at a college. This was particularly true for full-time students.

Although the average full-time fees by source of course funding showed little variation, significantly, full-time students on franchised courses taking a Bachelor's degree paid an average of £3,153 while those on similar directly HEFCE funded courses paid over £500 less, just £2,639. In addition, for part-time students, fees on franchised courses were higher than those funded directly by HEFCE.

In addition, the distribution of the full-time fees charged varied by source of course funding. Directly-funded courses were more likely to be cheaper than franchised courses. For example, six per cent of students on directly funded full-time courses paid around £2,500 compared with just one percent of those on franchised courses. At the other end of the scale, eight per cent of students on full-time directly funded courses paid the maximum tuition fee of £3,375 compared with 12% of student on franchised courses.

Table 5.12: Average tuition fees by mode of study and by qualification aim, subject and source of course funding

	Study full-time £	**Study part-time** £
All	2,804	1,373
Qualification aim		
Bachelor's degree	3,108	1,954
Foundation degree	2,694	1,451
HNC/HND	2,542	1,190
Subject of Study		
Medicine, subjects allied to medicine etc	2,979	1,540
Physical sciences etc	2,638	1,537
Engineering and technology	3,592	1,234
Social studies etc	2,654	*
Business and administrative studies and Law	2,800	1,387
Creative arts and design	3,002	*
Education	2,089	1,292
Other and combined subjects	3,107	2,204
Course funding source		
Direct from HEFCE	2,757	1,304
Franchised from HEI	2,838	1,542
Tuition fees are lower at colleges one of main reason for taking a course at a college rather than a university		
Yes	2,401	1,301
No	2,982	1,404

Base: All students (N=2,523)

* indicates too few observations for reliable estimates

According to the Office for Fair Access (2010), there is now no variability in higher education institution's fees for Bachelor's degrees but some variability in the price of their sub-degrees, many of which are delivered by further education colleges. However, there is significantly more variability in the fees charged by directly-funded further education colleges. Our findings substantiate this claim. In 2011/12, all universities were charging the maximum tuition fee of £3,375 for a Bachelor's degree for students studying on site while the students surveyed paid £3,108 – a difference of just £267, although those on directly-funded courses paid less. This suggests that students are making only minor financial savings, in terms of their fees, by studying at a college compared to a university.[12]

Together these findings largely confirm the observations, discussed in Chapter 4 concerning the setting of fees. Most higher education institutions were relaxed about further education colleges setting fee levels for courses they validate, and saw it essentially as a decision for the further education colleges. In the case of indirectly funded, i.e. franchised, provision the picture was less clear-cut. The majority of higher education institutions prescribed the fee level. However, as a result of these different fee-setting approaches, the student survey data suggest that where colleges had more control over setting their tuition fees, they also tended to set lower fees. However, students were unlikely to be aware of how these funding differences influenced the level of their tuition. And for those taking a Bachelor's degree, there was only a small price difference for those studying at colleges compared with those studying at higher education institutions.

5.6.2 How students paid for their course fees

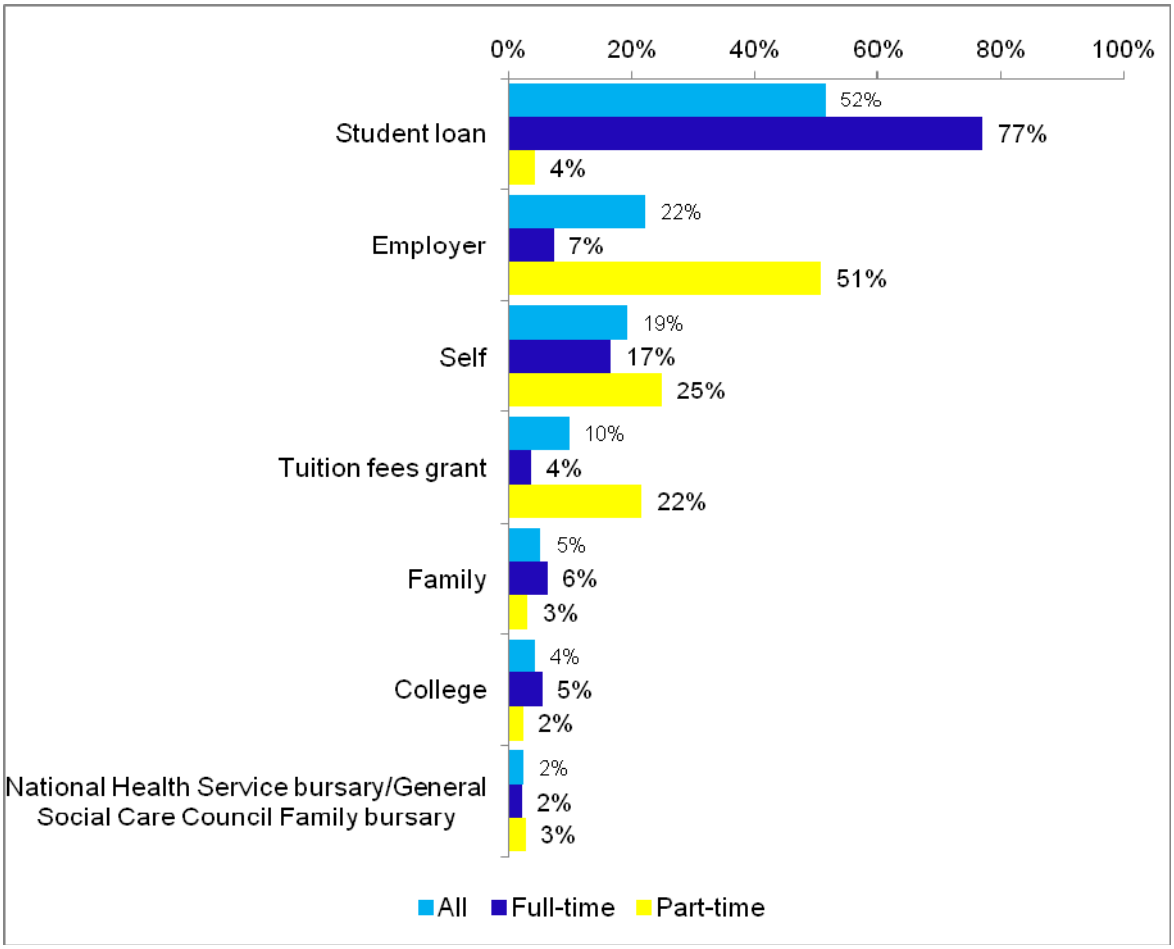
Figure 5.10 shows how college students paid their fees and how this varied by their mode of study. Predictably those studying full-time were most likely to have taken out a student loan (77%) with the rest most often paying their fees themselves (17%). In contrast, half of part-time students received help with their fees from their employer while a quarter contributed to their fees themselves and just over two in five received a government-funded tuition fee grant.[13] These findings largely confirm those of other studies of full and part-time students at higher education institutions, given the students qualification aims.

In addition, those most likely to receive employer support were those who, when ask why they entered higher education reported, that 'My employer/someone at my workplace encouraged me to apply.' Some 69% of those who reported employer encouragement as a reason for entering higher education reported they received employer support with their tuition fees. In contrast, 13% of those who did not report employer encouragement as a reason for entering higher education obtained employer financial support with their fees.

[12] There are no comparable national data on the fees for part-time students, which vary greatly by students' intensity of study.

[13] At the time this study was conducted, students loans were not available for students studying part-time. From 2012/13 fee grants will be abolished for new entrants studying part-time and will be replaced by student fee loans. Only part-time students who do not already hold a Level 4 qualification and study more than 25% of a full-time course will qualify for these loans.

Figure 5.10 Source of who paid for tuition fees by mode of study



Base: All students (N=2,523)

5.6.3 Concerns about the costs of study

Around a third (33%) of all students agreed with the statement 'I worry about the costs of studying/financing my course' while 44% disagreed and 23% neither agreed nor disagreed (Figure 5.8c). The proportion was not higher probably because most students had adopted a range of strategies to minimise their costs for instance, by living at home and taking part-time term-time jobs. Those more likely to worry about the costs were taking a Bachelor's degree (41%), studying full-time (38%) and women (39%) - characteristics which were interlinked (Table 5.6). Bachelor's degree students were more likely than those aiming for other qualifications to be paying their fees themselves with the help of student loans (69% of Bachelor's degree students, 54% of Foundation degree students and 29% of HNC/HND students paid their fees themselves with the help of student loans). In addition, as we have seen (Table 5.12), these students paid the highest fees.

In contrast, those most likely to disagree with the statement that they were worried about the costs of studying were studying part-time (59%) and aiming for HNC/HNDs (55%). Their lack of concern was related probably to the following factors. First, part-time students' fees were lower than those of full-time students (Table 5.12). Secondly, part-time and HNC/HND students were more likely to be employed full-time and thus may have felt their fees were more affordable (75% of part-time students were employed full-time

compared with just 14% of full-time students; and 65% of HNC/HND students were employed full-time compared with 33% of Foundation Degree students and 17% of Bachelor's Degree students). Finally, and most important of all, they were far more likely to get employer support with their tuition fees (51% of part-time students got employer fee support compared with just 7% of full-time students; and 50% of HNC/HND students got employer fee support compared with 19% of Foundation Degree students and 6% of Bachelor's Degree students).

As we have seen, students who said that one of the main reasons for taking a course at a college rather than a university did pay lower tuition fees compared with those who did not identify this reason (Table 5.12). However, there is little evidence to suggest that students' HE choices were driven by the costs of tuition, even though college fees tend to be cheaper than universities'. Only 27% of students identified the lower tuition fees charged by colleges as a reason for deciding to take a course at a college rather than a university. However, this rose to 41% for those aiming for an HNC/HNC probably because, as other research shows (OFFA, 2010), on the whole colleges charge less for sub-degree qualifications than universities and so the price differential between university and college provision is greatest for these types of qualifications. In contrast, the proportion of those taking a Bachelor's degree who identified lower college tuition fees as a reason for deciding to take a course at a college rather than a university, fell to 21%. This is probably because, as we have seen, the average tuition fee difference between studying for a degree at a university and college was just £267.

Only 22% of students were attracted to their particular college because of the tuition fees charged and bursaries available, especially those studying full-time rather than part-time (26% compared with 15%), and younger students rather than with those aged 25 and over (26% compared with 19%). This confirms the findings from other research which suggests that currently bursaries have very limited impact on student higher education choices (Callender, 2009).

Furthermore, a third of college students surveyed characterised their college as affordable while only seven per cent rated them expensive. There were no significant differences in student perceptions of the affordability of their college by their mode of study or qualification aim. However, those undertaking courses directed funded by HEFCE were more likely than those on franchised courses to consider their course affordable (39% compared with 28%) because, as we have seen, their fees were cheaper.

In contrast, concern about the costs of study was a recurring theme in the student discussion group. And as already mentioned, according to the discussion groups, financial concerns did influence students' higher education choices and restrict their options, especially the costs associated with moving away from home to study at another college or university. Significantly, the students were far more troubled about the costs of living than about their tuition fees. And indeed, for these students, these maintenance costs were likely to be far greater than their tuition fees. For instance, according to the most recent Student Income and Expenditure Survey, full-time students' living costs currently are around twice the cost of their tuition fees (Johnston et al, 2009), although this will change come 2012/13. This helps explain why more students surveyed were worried about the costs of study than about tuition fees.

Even when students attended colleges and lived in low-cost areas, they still voiced worries about their finances. For example, some students at a college in the South West of England taking a BA in Fashion and Textiles talked about how difficult it was to make ends meet, especially those receiving means-tested grants, and from low-income households. Nearly all the students were doing evening or part –time work in order to pay their way through college. Moreover, because of the nature of their course, they incurred additional costs associated with for instance, studio fees for displays, and the use of specialist equipment.

5.6.4 Summary and conclusions

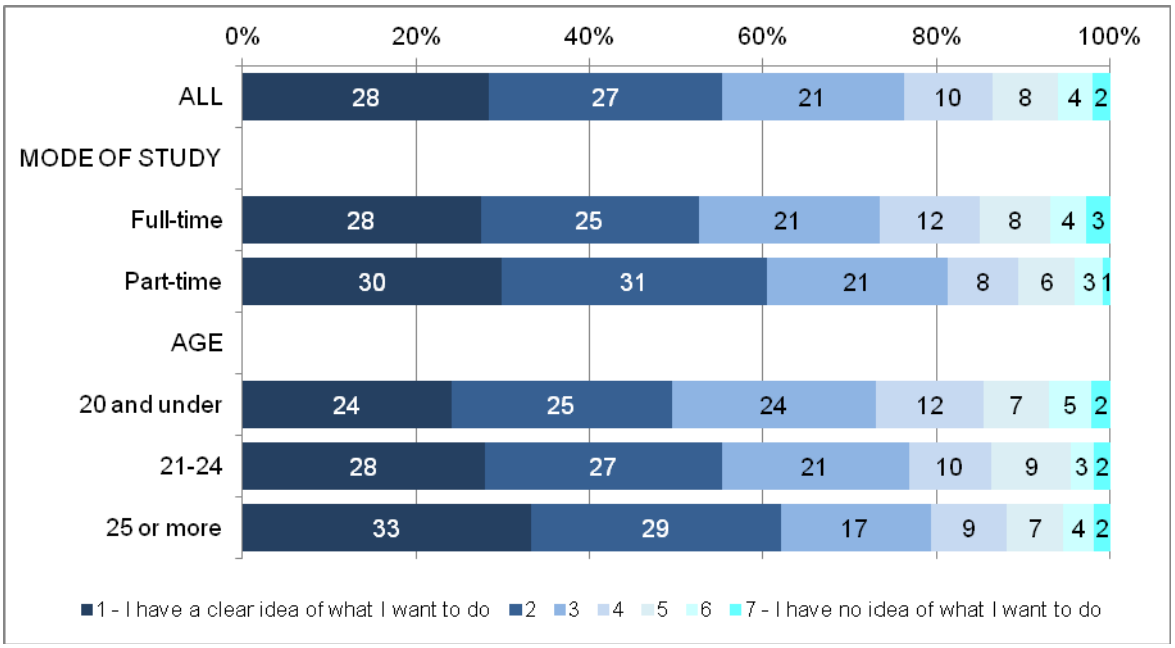
The average tuition fee for full-time students in 2011/12 was £2,804 while for part-time students it was £1,373. Fees varied by qualification aim and subject of study. Some of the most pronounced fee differences, however, were associated with who funded the course. Where colleges had directly funded HEFCE places and greater control over setting their tuition fees, they tended to charge lower fees than colleges with indirectly franchised courses.

Full-time students most often paid for their fees via student loans while part-timers relied on employer support or themselves. Only a minority were worried about the costs of studying and/or financing their course. Their perceptions reflected the realities of college' pricing policies and whether they had to meet these costs themselves through student loans or via other means, or through employer support. The higher education choices of the students surveyed did not appear to be influenced a great deal by lower college fees. This was probably because the differences in fee charged by colleges and universities were small, especially for those aiming for a Bachelor's degree, and because fees were substantial less than the high living costs associated with moving to study at a university. Indeed, the costs of study rather than tuition fees were a major theme in the student discussion groups. These students had restricted their choices because of financial concerns, especially the costs associated with leaving home to study at a university or another college. A finding which reminds us that the general living costs of a university higher education for those living away from home are far larger than the current level of fees. For these college students, it was the living costs that were a significant barrier to attending a university, but not the only one.

5.7 Students' career and future plans

The students surveyed were asked to rate the clarity of their long-term career and future on a scale of 1-7 s where 1 means 'I have a clear idea about what I want to do' and 7 means 'I have no idea what I want to do' (Figure 5.11). Over half (55%) the students had clear ideas about their long-term career and their future ('1+2') (Figure 5.11). There was some variation by students' age and their mode of study. Students aged 25 and over had much clearer plans than either those aged 20 or under, or between 21 and 24 (62% compared with 49% and 55%) while students studying part-time rather than full-time also had greater clarity (61% compared with 53%). Overall, these findings accord with students' motivations for entering higher education (Figure 5.1).

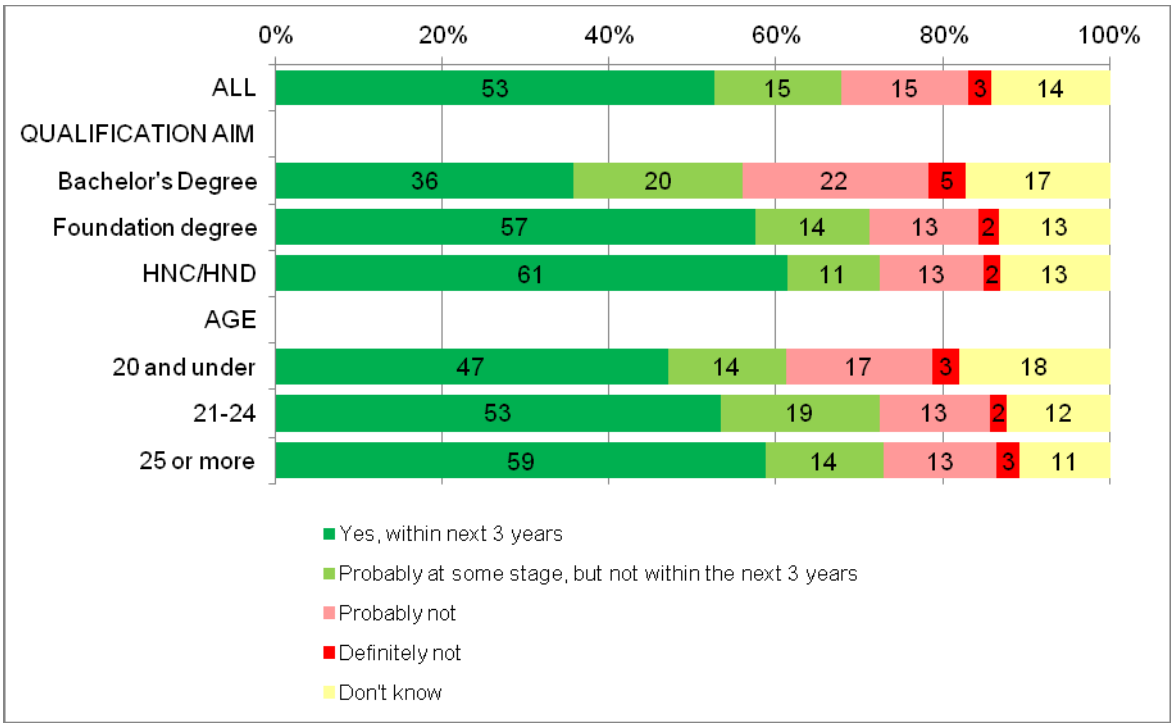
Figure 5.11 Clarity of thought on long-term career and future by mode of study and age



Base: All students (N=2,490)

A similar question was asked in Purcell et al's (2009) study of full-time undergraduates studying at higher education institutions and Callender and Wilkinson's (forthcoming) study of part-time students. Purcell et al (2009 p. 18) revealed that only 43% of full-time students had clear ideas about their career plans after their first year of study. However, they too found that the older the student, the clearer their career plans. By contrast, Callender and Wilkinson (forthcoming p.61) discovered that 55% of part-time students had clear ideas. Thus, a large part of the difference between full and part-time higher education institution students can be attributed to their age. When compared with the findings for the college students surveyed, it suggests that college students, especially those aged over 25, we more likely to have clearer career and plans than their university peers.

Figure 5.12 Future study intentions by qualification aim and age

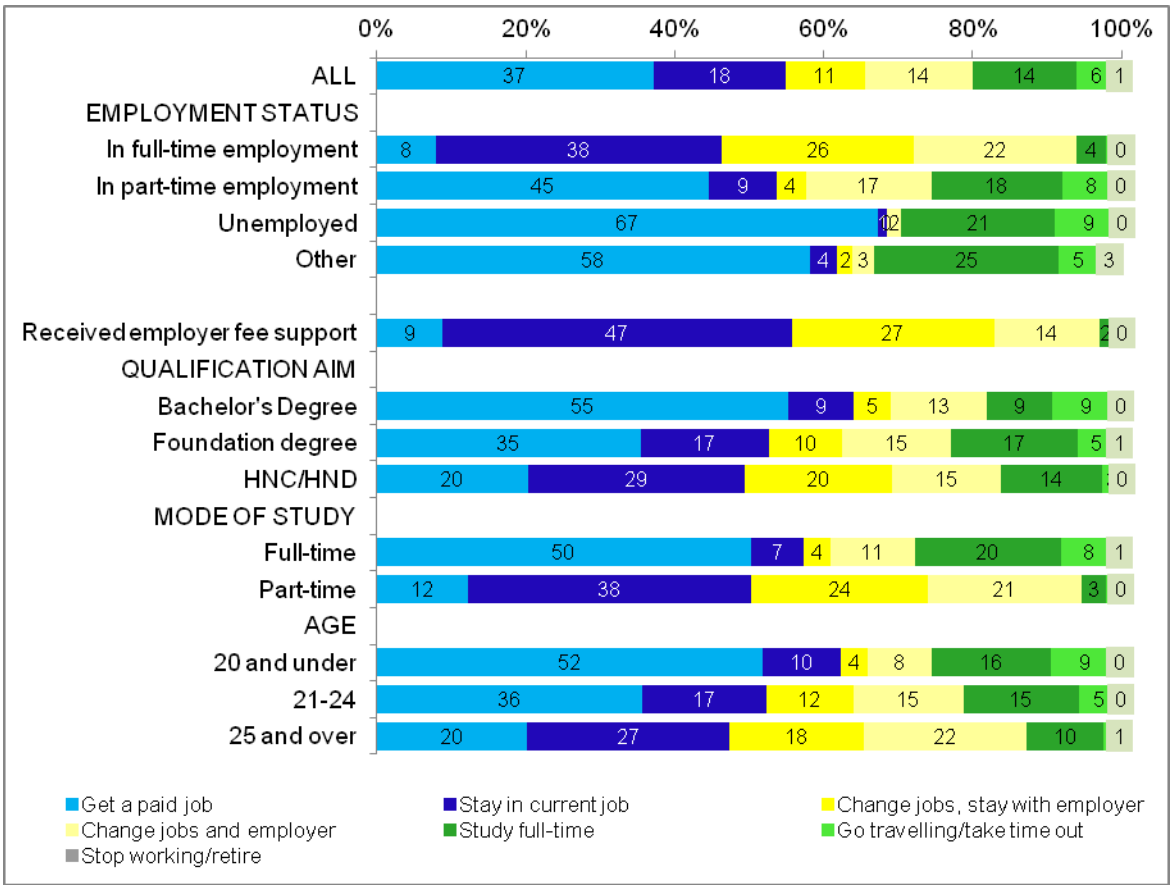


Base: All students (N=2,493)

The majority (53%) of students surveyed intended to take another course or qualification within the next 1-3 years (Figure 5.12). There were considerable variations in students' future study plans by their qualification aim and age. Students taking an HNC/HND were the most likely to be planning further study (61%) while those aiming for a Bachelor's degree were least likely (36%). Given the age profile of the students taking these qualifications (Table 5.6), students aged 25 and over were also more likely to anticipate taking another course or qualification than those aged 20 and under (59% compared with 47%).

Finally, the students surveyed were asked what they hoped to do once they had finished their current course (Figure 5.13). Most frequently they intended to get a paid job (38%) or stay in their current job (18%). Inevitably, their plans varied by their current employment status. Students in part-time jobs (45%) and without paid work (unemployed 67% and not working 58%) were much more likely to report they would get a job than those in full-time employment (8%). Conversely, those in full-time employment were much more likely than those in part-time jobs to say they intended to stay in their jobs (38% compared with 9%), especially those who had received help from their employer with their fees (47%). Thus predictably, students taking a Bachelor's degree rather than a Foundation degree or HNC/HND were more likely to report they wanted to get a job (55% compared with 35% and 20%), as were those studying full time rather than part-time (50% compared with 12%), and younger students (52% 20 and under, 36% 21-24, 20% 25 and over). The students most likely to report that they were going to stay in their current job were studying part-time rather than full-time (38% compared with 7%), were aiming for an HNC/HND rather than a Bachelor's or Foundation degree (29% compared with 9% and 17%), and were 25 and over rather than 21-24 or 20 or under (27% compared with 17%, and 10%).

Figure 5.13 Plans when finish current course by employment status, qualification aim, mode of study and whether received employer fee support



Base: All students (N=2,469)

5.7.1 Summary and conclusions

Over a half of the students surveyed had clear ideas about their long-term career plans and their future, a higher proportion than most of their peers studying in higher education institutions. Most intended to take another course in the next 1-3 years, especially those taking sub-degree courses. Students' future plans also depended on their mode of study and current employment status. Nearly two-thirds of those who were unemployed, nearly a half of those in part-time jobs, and a half of full-time students planned to get a paid job once they completed their course. In contrast, students with part-time jobs and studying part-time were far more likely to stay in their current job, or change jobs and employer.

5.8 Widening participation and the college learning environment

Both our interviews with case study college managers and their higher education institution partners, discussed in Chapter 4, confirmed the importance of higher in further education for meeting the government's widening participation agenda. They asserted that FE Colleges were more likely to be used by groups targeted by government policies for widening participation than universities, especially pre-1992 universities. The case study college managers talked about how, typically, their students came from disadvantaged backgrounds and entered with vocational rather than academic qualifications. However,

many rejected a 'deficit' model to describe the major characteristics of further education students compared with students studying in higher education institutions.

As we have seen (Table 5.1), many of the college students surveyed did not come from socially or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Nearly a half came from managerial and professional backgrounds; a third had at least one parent with a higher education qualification, while for nearly a fifth their highest qualification on entry was Level 4 or above (Table 5.1). In particular for two per cent, their highest entry qualification was a postgraduate qualification and for 16% it was an undergraduate qualification. If we limit our analysis to those students aiming for a Bachelor degree, four per cent had a postgraduate entry qualification and 29% had an undergraduate entry qualification.

Research shows a myriad of social, material, and cultural factors discourage higher education participation among those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and influence students' higher education choices about where and what to study (e.g. Archer et al, 2003; Reay et al, 2005, Callender and Jackson, 2008). It demonstrates that the key determinant of higher education participation is students' prior academic achievement as measured by their 'A' Levels or equivalent (Vignoles, 2010). As we have seen (Table 5.1), some 13 per cent of all students surveyed had entry qualifications below 2 'A' Levels. Some 8% of students studying for a Bachelor's degree had entry qualifications below 2 A levels. The figures for Foundation Degrees and HNC/HNDs were 15% and 14% respectively. This suggests that the case study colleges were pursuing a widening participation agenda in terms of their entry requirements but many of their students did have standard higher education entry qualifications or higher.[14]

Research concerning widening participation also highlights how students are often deterred from higher education entry, and/or applying to university, especially-1992 higher education institutions, because they attend poorly performing schools in terms of GCSE league tables (Reay, et al 2009). For these structural reasons, they often are unprepared for the university experience, lacking a sense of entitlement and the self-confidence and disposition to study, to relate to the universities' academic environment. Unsurprisingly, students tend to choose a university where they feel comfortable, where there are 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990).

These issues similarly affected the choices of the college students' surveyed (Figures 5.2 and 5.5). There was evidence that students appreciated the supportive and inclusive learning environment and culture that colleges offered. However, these college features were not the main drivers in their decision to study at a college rather than a university, nor when selecting their college. They were one of the many factors students took into consideration.

As discussed above, some of most common reasons for studying at a college rather than a university reflected students' attraction to a supportive learning environment. A college milieu was familiar because they had already studied at a college, and felt a comfortable place to study (Figure 5.2). Similarly, students' choice of college (Figure 5.5) was

[14] No data were collected on the college students' UCAS point so it is not possible to judge if these were lower or higher than those required for university entrance.

influenced by the fact that they had studied previously at the college, and 'the college felt like the right place for someone like me', especially for those taking a Bachelor's degree. In addition, in our multivariate analysis showed that students who selected their college because it was near their home or place of work or because they had progressed from another course at their college or previously studied at the college were far less likely to apply elsewhere to study. So colleges were a 'safe' place for these students although such decisions may limit students' opportunities.

5.8.1 Summary and conclusions

Together, these findings suggest, colleges were playing a role in furthering the widening participation agenda. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, they are places where students can qualify for entry to higher education on the basis of academic, vocational and access qualifications; and as providers of higher education in their own right on behalf of partner higher education institutions. However, it would be a mistake to see the college students at these case study colleges as only consisting of 'typical' widening participation groups.

5.9 Conclusions

The majority of the students surveyed were female; white; and single with no children. Their highest qualification on entry to their higher education course was two 'A' Levels or equivalent. They were mainly non-traditional students whereby neither parent had completed or was studying for a higher education qualification but most had had some exposure to higher education because another close relative had completed or was studying for a higher education qualification. The majority were aiming for a Foundation degree and studied full-time on a course directly funded by HEFCE.

Student motives for entering higher education were primarily instrumental: they wanted to improve their life chances and job prospects. These employment and career related reasons, alongside interest in their course, were also why they selected their course. They selected their college mostly because of the courses available and it was near their home or place of work.

However, it is questionable the extent to which the students surveyed were making an informed choice when opting to study at a college rather than a university because most had no, or very limited, experience of universities, and they were largely unaware or indifferent to what universities could offer. Nor were they particularly drawn to further education colleges because of the purported distinctive missions of colleges compared with higher education institutions, especially in terms of employer engagement activities.

A minority of students – some 17% of those studying for a Bachelor's degree- were not choosing to study at a college rather than a university, quite the opposite, they thought they had applied to study at a university rather than a college. This raises issues about the clarity of the information provided by universities, given that those who had applied to other universities, who were taking Bachelor's degrees, and on franchised courses were most likely to be confused about where their courses were to take place, after controlling for various factors. For this student group, their choices certainly were not informed, instead they were misinformed.

Around two-thirds of students did not apply elsewhere to study, apart from the college where they were studying now. For many of these students their choices were often limited and highly constrained, even when the college they were attending was their first choice. Students who selected their college because it was near their home or place of work, or because they had progressed from another course at their college or previously studied at the college, were far less likely to apply elsewhere to study. They were opting for a convenient and 'safe' place to study. While some were making a positive informed choice to study at their particular college, others were restricting their options and choices, consciously or unconsciously. Those limiting their choice to their local college were often hindered by their material, cultural, and social circumstances which constrained their options. For whatever reasons, they did not appear to see they had other choices, and thus may have limited their opportunities too. It is questionable, therefore, if all these student groups were making informed choices.

Others students had broader horizons and did apply elsewhere to study. Those most likely to apply to universities were aged under 20, single, white, and came from families where at least one parent had had some experience of higher education, once other factors are taken into account. For some of these students the decision to study at a college rather than a university may have been a positive one as they genuinely had a choice between a college and a university. For these students, what attracted them to a college over a university was the smaller college class size. However, none of the other college features, such as college's learning environment or employer engagement activities were a strong lure to study at a college rather than at a university. For others who applied to a university but had not gone to a university, they rarely had a genuine choice because they had failed to obtain the university's entry requirements. They had no choice but to go to a college if they wanted a higher education.

College students most frequently identified with the label of 'university student', especially younger students taking a Bachelor's degree and studying full-time. However, where they had an alternative occupational identify to call upon, they opted for that instead. Consequently, only a small minority – around 16% - identified with being called a 'college student'.

Overall, college students' educational experience was positive, just like those reported in other research studies who study in higher education institutions. However, their assessment of the college environment and their individual daily experiences of being a student, including the help and support they received, were more mixed, and were not as good as those of university students. On the one hand, college students did not have access to the full range of experiences available in higher education institutions – in particular regarding learning resources but also in terms of extra-curricular activities. On the other hand, college students had a more personal learning environment than may be available to students in higher education institutions, as indicted by the fact that the majority of college students surveyed thought their lectures and tutors knew their name, unlike their higher education institution peers in other studies. Yet, there appeared to be limited differences in the number of hours of face-to-face contact with teaching staff at colleges compared with those studying at universities - another espoused difference between colleges and higher education institutions. Full-time college students had an average of 16 hours a week of face-to-face contact with teaching staff while broadly similar data from other studies for full-time university students suggest they have 15 hours a week.

The experiences of the part-time college students surveyed were certainly not as good as those of their full-time peers, or those of part-time students studying at universities. This suggests there is scope for our case study colleges to provide their part-time students with greater personal support and feedback than they currently receive. In addition, these colleges' support structures appear to be geared more successfully towards the needs of younger full-time students than those studying part-time. In turn, this brings into question, the responsiveness of the case-study colleges to the realities of students' desire for flexible study and for combining study with full-time employment – a feature colleges pride themselves on as part of their broader agenda of providing flexible higher education vocational provision, and an acclaimed distinctive feature of further education provision.

The average tuition fee for full-time college students in 2011/12 was £2,804 while for part-time students it was £1,373. Fees varied by qualification aim and subject of study. Some of the most pronounced fee differences, however, were associated with who funded the course. Where colleges had directly funded HEFCE places and greater control over setting their tuition fees, they tended to charge lower fees than colleges with indirectly franchised courses. Consequently, in 2011/12 there was only a £267 difference in the fees charged for a franchised Bachelor's degree delivered at a college, compared with one delivered by a university (£3,108 compared with £3,375). So these students were making only minor financial savings, in terms of tuition fees, by studying at a college compared to a university. And it is questionable if for these students, colleges were offering better value for money than universities, especially given the similar number of teaching hours at colleges and universities.

Full-time students most often paid for their fees via student loans while part-timers relied on employer support or themselves. Only a minority (up to 41% taking a Bachelor's degree) were worried about the costs of studying and/or financing their course primarily because they had taken actions to minimise these costs by for instance, living at home with their parents or taking part-time jobs. Nor were students' higher education choices influenced a great deal by lower college fees. This was probably because the differences in fee charged by colleges and universities, on average, were small and because fees were substantially lower than students' living costs. Indeed, the costs of study, especially those associated with leaving home to study at a university or another college, rather than tuition fees had restricted students' choices. A finding which reminds us that the general living costs of a university higher education for those living away from home are far larger than the current level of fees. For these college students, it was the living costs that were a significant barrier to attending a university, but not the only barrier.

Over a half of the students surveyed had clear ideas about their long-term career plans and their future, a higher proportion than most of their peers studying in higher education institutions. Most intended to take another course in the next 1-3 years, especially those taking sub-degree courses. Students' future plans also depended on their mode of study and current employment status. Nearly two-thirds of those who were unemployed, nearly a half of those with part-time jobs, and a half of full-time students planned to get a paid job once they completed their course. In contrast, students with full-time jobs and studying part-time were far more likely to plan to stay in their current job, or change jobs and employer.

Together, these findings suggest, colleges were playing a role in furthering the widening participation agenda. They were places where students could qualify for entry to higher

education on the basis of academic, vocational and access qualifications; and as providers of higher education in their own right on behalf of partner higher education institutions. However, it would be a mistake to see the college students at these case study colleges as only consisting of ‘typical’ widening participation groups.

6 Views and valuations of employers

6.1 Introduction

This chapter reports the findings of telephone interviews with 101 organisations who either recruited students from higher education courses, or who collaborated with higher education providers to deliver such programmes for their employees, or who did both. The main aims of the employer interviews were: firstly, to identify the nature of their involvements with higher education courses in further education colleges and universities; and, secondly, to ascertain their preferences or requirements in relation to higher education programmes provided by further education institutions or by universities. In the interviews, the term 'universities' was used as a shorthand to include all higher education institutions. This convention is continued in the present chapter.

The interviews were based on a purposive sample drawn from two sources: from a database of employers held by Foundation Degree Forward; and from the lists of employers provided by the case-study colleges. Foundation Degree Forward was the national body set up by the Government to support and promote the development of Foundation Degrees with FECs, HEIs and employers. Before it closed in July 2011, approval was given for the fieldwork team to approach the named contacts on its employer database. One of these organisations was used to pilot the interview schedule. The other organisations were identified by the case-study colleges who like Foundation Degree Forward, contacted employers for permission for the fieldwork team to approach them for interviews.

The sample was generated in this manner in order to identify organisations that could report and comment on their involvements with further education colleges and, where possible, compare these with their involvements with universities. Most employers in the sample had relationships with both colleges and universities. This method also had the merit of identifying the relevant individual in the organisation who would know about its relationships with FECs and colleges, and so be in a position to compare the experience of working with the two sets of institutions. Given the basis of the sampling, the aim of the interviews was to collect indicative and illustrative data on areas for which there was little or no coverage in the existing literature.

The interviews were conducted by telephone and undertaken between October 2011 and March 2012. Most were completed in 20 to 25 minutes. The interview schedule included both closed and open questions.

Following a description of the organisations in the sample, the findings are reported under five main headings: employer involvement with providers of higher education; colleges and universities as sources of recruitment; colleges and universities as providers of continuing professional development; employer support for the education and training of the workforce; and collaboration in course design and delivery. In each case, the nature and extent of these involvements are summarised in tables of descriptive statistics. The views and valuations of employers are reported, and their assessments of present and future

activities are described. Alongside frequency counts of responses to open questions, extracts from interviews are quoted to illustrate or elaborate on themes and issues.

6.2 Characteristics of the employers

Originally, it was intended that the sample would draw on equal numbers of organisations identified by Foundation Degree Forward and the case-study colleges. In the event, 18 employers were interviewed from those on the Foundation Degree Forward database and 83 were interviewed from those identified by the colleges (Table 6.1). This increased the bias in favour of organisations selected by the colleges themselves, with implications for their scope to offer comparative views and judgements beyond the linked college.

Table 6.1: Source of contacts for employers

N=101	*Responses*	*Percentage*
Foundation Degree Forward	18	17.8
Case-study college	83	82.2
Total	101	100.0

A majority of the organisations in the sample operated in more than one location (Table 6.2). In most cases, those interviewed were based on the main site or at the office and were able to respond on behalf of the whole organisation. In some of the larger enterprises, those interviewed responded on behalf of a section of the organisation.

Table 6.2: Organisations with single or multiple establishments

N=101	*Responses*	*Percentage*
Single establishment	40	39.6
Multiple establishments/sites	60	59.4
No response	1	1.0
Total	101	100.0

Around two-thirds of these organisations were from the private sector, with over one-quarter (27%) from the public sector and the rest (5%) from the voluntary or not-for-profit sector (Table 6.3).

Table 6.3: Type of organisation

N=101	*Responses*
Private sector	69
Public sector	27
Voluntary or not-for-profit sector	5
Total	101

The organisations spanned a range of sizes, with 37 employing more than 1,000 people and, at the other end of the scale, 13 micro enterprises with nine or less in the workforce (Table 6.4).

Twenty-two of the largest organisations were in the private sector and the other 15 were in the public sector. All but three of the 13 micro-enterprises were private outfits. The voluntary and not-for-profit organisations were large, medium and small in size. Close to one-quarter of organisations had workforces of between 20 and 199, most of them in the private sector. Organisations taken from the Foundation Degree Forward database were predominantly private sector and large. The private sector also accounted for the majority of enterprises in the college-derived sample but this was a more heterogeneous group in terms of sector and size.

Table 6.4: Number of people in the workforce

N=101	*Responses*	*Percentage*
1-9	13	12.9
10-24	7	6.9
25-49	8	7.9
20-99	12	12.9
100-199	11	10.9
200-249	3	3.0
250-499	5	5.0
500-999	4	4.0
1000+	37	36.6
Not known	1	1.0
Total	101	100.0

The primary spheres of influence of these organisations were varied, with nearly one-half operating locally or regionally and around one-third with an international reach. Roughly one in six operated nationally (Table 6.5).

Table 6.5: Primary sphere of operation of organisations

N=101	*Responses*	*Percentage*
Local	20	19.8
Regional	27	26.7
National	18	17.8
International	35	34.7
No response	1	1.0
Total	101	100.0

The proportion of the workforce (or relevant section of the workforce) holding higher education qualifications averaged 47% (based on 70 responses). The smallest was 1% and the largest was 100%. The median was around 40%, with one-half of the organisations falling between just over 20% and 60%.

6.3 Employer involvement with colleges and universities

Whereas employers used universities roughly equally for recruitment and for continuing professional development, their involvement with colleges was more as providers of courses for their employees rather than as a source of new recruits (Table 6.6 and 6.7).

Table 6.6: Involvement of employers with higher education in further education colleges

	Responses
As a recruiter	48
As a provider of courses for employees	66
As a collaborator in course design and delivery	30
As a collaborator in research and development	2
Other	37
No involvement	3
Total (more than one response allowed)	186

Table 6.7: Involvement of employers with higher education in universities

	Responses
As a recruiter	53
As a provider of courses for employees	47
As a collaborator in course design and delivery	27
As a collaborator in research and development	11
Other	41
No involvement	18
Total (more than one response allowed)	197

A small number of employers also collaborated with universities for the purposes of research and development. Given that colleges were predominantly teaching-only institutions, their involvement with employers in these activities was minimal. However, a significant number of employers collaborated with colleges and universities in the design and delivery of courses as well as in a host of other specific ways.

In both sets of institutions, the main involvement in the ‘other’ category was the provision of work placements and internships (Table 6.8 and 6.9). These were often accompanied by activities such as running short courses and workshops, giving talks, attending review and validation events, and providing careers guidance. A second most common form of involvement (by design companies) was to set ‘briefs’ for art and design students and to run competitions. In some of these examples, the involvement was limited to providing a service to the institution rather than collaborating on course design and delivery.

Table 6.8: Other forms of employer involvement with higher education in further education colleges

Response (may be more than one)	*Count*
Work experience; placements; internships	29
1 Apprenticeships	2
Site visits (students to the employer)	3
Student project/brief – setting/competition	8
Portfolio reviews	2
Run workshops; run short courses; teach on HE course	6
Do talks; give careers guidance	4
Recruit volunteers	1
Moderator and QAA reviewer	1
Advisory board for industry needs	1

Table 6.9: Other forms of employer involvement with higher education in universities

Response (may be more than one)	*Count*
Work experience; placements; internships	27
Site visits (students to the employer)	1
Student project/brief – setting/competition	5
Run workshops; run short courses; teach on HE course	2
Do talks; give careers guidance	1
To get accreditation of employers' in-house training	2
Commission training	1
Attend meetings only	1
Moderator and QAA reviewer	1
Attend validation events	1
Sponsorship	1

6.4 Colleges and universities as sources of recruitment

In recruiting people with higher education qualifications, the employers in the sample clustered in two groups: those who drew equally from colleges and universities –

42 out of 101 – and those that recruited mainly or only from universities – 32 out of 101 (Table 6.10). A smaller number of organisations – ten – had a preference for, or only recruited, from colleges. Overall, a large majority of employers (80 out 101) recruited from both kinds of institution.

Table 6.10: Recruitment from universities or colleges or both

N=101	*Responses*	*Percentage*
Mainly colleges	10	9.9
Only colleges	0	0.0
Mainly universities	28	27.7
Only universities	4	4.0
Both equally	42	41.6
Other	12	11.9
Don't know	4	4.0
No response	3	1.0
Total	101	100.0

In the main, this pattern reflected the types and levels of qualifications sought by employers. Where a higher education qualification below Bachelors' level was required, such as a Foundation Degree or a HND or HNC, then employers generally looked to recruit from either set of providers. In some cases, this reflected long-standing relationships between local employers and institutions. These were often institutions with a history of past involvement in day-release education and training, especially among the colleges and some of the former polytechnics.

Other examples were more recent, with the Foundation Degree commonly providing a vehicle for new partnerships between colleges, universities and employers. These were often in specialist and niche areas where there was demand for new sets of skills and knowledge or where there was a shortage of skills at the intermediate levels.

Where Bachelors' qualifications were required (reported in 59 cases), the larger private sector organisations – in particular the engineering and technology companies – recruited almost always from among the universities, usually from a specific few institutions:

> *We only recruit from specific universities with expertise in teaching relevant courses. The company has classified universities (gold, silver or bronze) based on their expertise and reputation and targets recruitment accordingly.*
>
> *The business takes graduates for job specific roles and graduate training schemes. It wants high quality graduates who will remain with the company in the long term. The company knows which institutions are likely to produce the calibre of recruits we want.*

Outside this group, the picture was mixed, with several of the smaller firms and public sector organisations recruiting Bachelors' students from colleges as well as universities. Sometimes, this was where a college or university offered progression to the final year of a Bachelor's Degree following successful completion of a Foundation Degree or a Higher National qualification. In other cases, they might be free-standing Bachelors' Degrees in specialist subjects (such as equine dentistry or osteopathy) where the colleges were the recognised or sometimes the sole providers in the public system.

Even so, Bachelors' Degrees were a small proportion of the higher education taught in colleges and these, in turn, were a very small proportion compared to those provided in

universities. In contrast to their preference for universities in the recruitment of individuals graduating with Bachelors' Degrees, respondents were more relaxed about whether colleges or universities were their preferred source of recruits with sub-Bachelor qualifications. Among those recruiting from both FECs and universities, the location of study usually only mattered because it was where a desired qualification was taught or most likely to be found (Table 6.11).

Table 6.11: Reasons for recruiting sub-Bachelor qualifications from both colleges and universities

	Counts
As long as they have the specific professional qualification it doesn't matter where from	10
Skills, aptitude, experience, interests, industry links are more important	4
It just depends where the qualification is offered	1
Level 4/5 is likely to come from a job	3
Local is cheaper	1

It was mostly in the context of sub-Bachelor qualifications that employers were in a position to compare recruitment from colleges and universities; and, if they had preferences or requirements, to describe them. When asked if there were differences between the two sets of institutions or between their higher education students, most employers found it difficult to generalise their experience in these terms. As businesses, this was not how they viewed their involvement with these institutions.

Indeed, their recruitment relationships with colleges and universities for short-cycle higher-level vocational qualifications rarely involved or invited such distinctions. This was a consistent view among those recruiting from qualifications at higher technician and lower professional levels. They had no wish and saw no reason to describe their recruitment policies and practices in such ways. Their preferences and priorities were frequently to do with the nature of course, the expertise of the staff and the capabilities of the students, and less the type of provider.

In some cases, they were critical of the teaching and learning on such programmes, especially where there was a lack of current industry expertise among the teaching team. Colleges and universities were also wide of the mark in some of their assumptions about roles in the workplace. Several employers expressed disappointment with the soft skills displayed by new recruits, including their appreciation of how to behave in a business environment and their unrealistic ideas about salary and conditions. Their academic competence, by contrast, occasioned little comment.

Although organisations might be directly involved with a small number of higher education providers, there was recognition that colleges and universities were diverse in their course offerings. Employers were keen to work with providers that demonstrated commitment and flexibility in the approach to working with businesses. There was an admission by some organisations that – because of increased competition – those entering with Bachelors' Degrees were not always employed in graduate-type jobs. Nevertheless, the bulk of employers recruiting from sub-Bachelor programmes expected to continue their links with

colleges and universities in the near future. Several expected higher standards of service and commitment in return for increased fees. In some cases, employers were looking to develop new pathways as their needs in specific or specialist areas evolved (such as in mechatronics).

A number of organisations saw the rise in fees for undergraduate education as an opportunity to recruit talented school-leavers who might be put off entering higher education because of the cost. Some were developing new schemes aimed at this population. Others were looking to expand their existing schemes. Either way, they hoped that their own training programmes (leading to qualifications at the higher levels) would be viewed as an attractive alternative to full-time higher education.

> *We prefer to grow our own. We want our employees to know our business and be specialist in the skills we require. We train our apprentices on the job and use colleges to back us up with the academic stuff. This way we get what the company needs.*

> *We've advertised for our new management apprenticeship programme and we're very pleased with the applications we've had. The response is better than for our graduate scheme and quality of applicants is better. We could have filled the places several times over.*

The impact on recruitment opportunities of these and other changes was unclear. The role of sub-Bachelor qualifications as a route to employment was likely to come under increasing pressure in many areas. At the same time, there might be more scope for these same qualifications to serve as vehicles for continuing professional development. Some of the organisations which had featured strongly in the growth of Foundation Degrees, such as those responsible for childcare and early years education, were confronted by reductions in government funding on the one side and increased tuition fees on the other. Much of their recruitment and workforce development was linked to provision in colleges and these relationships were probably among the most at risk.

A majority of organisations (61 reported cases) expected their future recruitment needs to remain broadly the same as at present compared to a sizeable minority (33 reported cases) who anticipated change. Among the reasons that might make them look more at colleges was the growth of apprenticeships at the higher levels and the expansion of work-focused qualifications similar to the Foundation Degree.

> *We have very good relationships with FE colleges and the Foundation Degree is a good course. They have all progressed from NVQ 2 and 3 and this seems to be the preferred model for our employees – we do not recruit graduates.*

> *We like to take our apprentices through the whole scheme and develop their potential. As part of the succession planning for the business there is likely to be more development with further education colleges, including for professional qualifications.*

> *I'm a huge fan of Level 4 apprenticeships. They provide the right balance of training and education. I like the idea of broad, liberal higher education but it*

isn't necessarily right for the business I'm in. I can see higher education moving much more towards skilling people rather than just educating them.

6.5 Colleges and universities as providers of CPD

For several employers, their involvement with courses of sub-Bachelor higher education was focused not on recruitment but on the continuing professional education of the workforce. The policy in several of these enterprises was to recruit part of the workforce at the lower qualification levels and, through in-house and external programmes, support their education and training through to the higher levels. Although the way the employer sample was generated was likely to privilege relationships with colleges over universities, only a minority of organisations used further education institutions (12 out of 101) as sole providers of CPD programmes. Most either worked equally with colleges and universities or undertook programmes mainly with universities or mainly with colleges. Only a small number of organisations worked exclusively with universities (Table 6.12).

Table 6.12: Use of colleges or universities or both for CPD

N=101	***Responses***	***Percentage***
Mainly colleges	20	19.8
Only colleges	12	11.9
Mainly universities	7	6.9
Only universities	6	5.9
Both equally	27	28.1
Other	22	21.8
Don't know	2	2.0
No response	5	5.0
Total	101	100.0

There were also a significant number of organisations (just under one-quarter) that relied on their own provision of education and training or looked to private providers for this purpose. Where they went outside, they might use a professional body, a specialist training centre (or network of training providers) or private providers of services, including vendor qualifications.

As in the case of recruitment at the sub-Bachelor levels, almost all the employers using colleges and universities for CPD indicated their willingness to work with any college or university that could offer programmes matched to their workforce development needs. Their experience was of working with specific institutions to meet specific employment and training needs. Occasionally, a preference was indicated for the practical skills that were likely to be fostered by higher education in a further education setting. That colleges might be closer to the world of work or more responsive to the needs of employers was a view that featured less frequently in the interviews.

We like working with colleges who offer specialist courses. They are used to dealing with employers. They provide the right environment for our employees – discipline, uniforms, things like that – so we have fewer problems. When we use universities they often forget that their 'students' are actually our 'employees'.

The university has a responsibility to provide a service to the employee but they sometimes forget, or fail to understand this.

Colleges are quicker on the uptake than universities when developing relationships with employers. Colleges tend to more business-focused, more commercial.

Colleges are more proactive in seeking input and marketing their services to businesses than are universities. Universities tend to be slower at building relationships. They are also more interested in research relationships than commercial contracts.

More evident was a general scepticism about the claims of colleges and universities to be strongly business-facing or commercially-minded.

Training is expensive. It isn't just the cost of course fees or travel. If an employee is out on a course I've got to pay someone else to do their job while they are away. So really I'm paying double. Colleges and universities never take this into account. When they talk about costs to employers they only think about the fee they are charging.

I look to work with institutions that have skilled academic staff with commercial experience. I want to know who my employees will be coming into contact with. Academic staff must ensure that they maintain their occupational competence – and I don't just mean through reading books.

Just because a university or college has worked with other businesses in the same sector and knows what they want it doesn't mean that we want the same thing. I want academics I work with to understand my business.

Some collaboration built on earlier activities, including with colleges where work with employers had also been at the further education levels and where relationships centred on recruitment. Others were more recent ventures. Again, the introduction of the work-focused Foundation Degree had been influential in forging partnerships between colleges, universities and employers. Although some organisations did not recruit higher education students with these types of qualification, they were nevertheless strong supporters of qualifications at these levels and used them to develop their own employees.

On the other hand, there were employers that did not find or secure the kind of provision they wanted. For them, it was more cost effective to do their own CPD and a way of ensuring that the training was up-to-date. All the same, there were signs of change.

Universities and colleges used to tell us what they offered and that was it. They basically offered lots of courses that weren't of any use to us, so I allocated a lot of CPD to private providers. Now they've come to realise that they need to offer courses that align with jobs. They've become more realistic.

We have a good rapport with colleges. The colleges know what we want because the lecturers have worked in our industry. The colleges want our

business. We are the customer, so if we have problems the colleges solve them. This works well.

Several organisations put their workforce development contracts out to tender. While some colleges and universities submitted what were considered to be reasonable bids, there were others that were excluded from the process at the first stage: either because they were insufficiently competitive or because they failed to match the specification. Some organisations were surprised by the number of institutions (including some with well-known business schools) that were less than adept in dealing with employers and at operating in a commercial environment. Difficulties had been experienced as well in the lines of communication with higher education providers, be they colleges or universities.

Collaboration can be hard work. I spend a lot of time chasing the college I'm working with. I would like them to be more open and communicate more. I would perhaps like weekly updates from a key contact. There have certainly been some issues with timescales. The college and business environments are very different when it comes to timescales.

We do have a big issue when working with our local college. The college lacks any employer focus. They just concentrate on educating the individual regardless of who pays the fees. In fact, they aren't in any way concerned about where the money comes from. When my employees are on site I know what they are doing and how well they are doing it. When they are out at the college I don't know what they are doing. I don't know whether they are turning up, what they are doing or how well they are doing it. I struggle to get any feedback. I would definitely appreciate more communication.

The universities that I deal with are used to working with students who pay their own fees. They aren't used to working with employers. They are slow to respond to us and hide behind layers of red tape. For example, if we ask for information about our employees' progress they tell us they can't provide it because of the data protection act. However, colleges have arrangements in place that let them communicate with us. Colleges understand they are providing a service, they know what we need and they find a way of delivering it.

Among the small and medium size enterprises in the sample, a number had struggled to find an appropriate vehicle, collaborative or otherwise, for addressing their training needs. They could not offer sufficient numbers for bespoke training and they found it difficult to identify existing programmes that aligned with their requirements and budgets.

A key consideration was proximity or, rather, travel time which – for the employer – was an important element in costing. Depending on the scale and range of services required, alongside the local and regional pattern of higher education provision, an organisation might have partnerships with several providers. Most employers in the sample had relationships with one, two or three further education colleges. A smaller proportion had partnerships with one, two and three universities. It was common for organisations with multiple partnerships to be linked both to colleges and universities. Among the large employers, there were examples of collaborations with six or more institutions.

Employers commented frequently on the pluralism of higher education providers and their courses. This was among the reasons given for collaboration with more than one provider of higher education. Some providers were more committed to working with employers than others but these were not associated with a type of institution. Several organisations attributed successful partnerships to the enthusiasm and actions of individuals rather than to the institution as a whole.

> *When I initially worked with the university the pace of their response and the language they used was all wrong. If it wasn't for the actions of their business manager the whole partnership would have been very difficult. The actions of just one person changed things. Collaboration and partnerships are often about the actions of individuals.*

This included individuals on the employer side. A high degree of dependence on individuals was recognised as a potential difficulty and it was highlighted in employer interviews where the arrival of a new manager resulted in more limited responses to the schedule of questions.

6.6 Support for employees to undertake CPD

More than half of the organisations in the employer sample contributed to the tuition fees of employees and a similar number provided time off for study (Table 6.13). The amount of time spent in the college or the university varied markedly, with learning in the workplace constituting a significant part of the programme in some cases. The latter was often a feature of courses provided exclusively or targeted mainly at the employees of a single enterprise (or group of similar organisations). These were programmes customised or specifically designed for such enterprises; and they were provided by colleges and universities in equal measure.

Table 6.13: Support for employees to undertake CPD

	Responses
Contribution to fees	79
Time off for study	74
Customised courses with colleges	21
Customised courses with universities	18
Other	32
Don't know	2
Total (more than one response allowed)	245

Payment of fees – in part or full – and time off to study were but a number of ways in which employees were supported in their CPD. Other forms of support in kind included access to specialist facilities and use of leading-edge technologies.

Although costs to the employer would increase from 2012, all but a few organisations expected to maintain their current level of engagement with colleges and universities. In one or two cases, there was the possibility it might increase. The expansion of higher-level apprenticeships was also likely to secure the position of continuing professional and workforce development in association with college and university providers.

Among the interviews undertaken in the early part of 2012, there were complaints from a number of employers about colleges not having decided their fees for the coming year. This delay was attributed in part to colleges waiting to hear about the outcomes of bids for student places from the margin.

6.7 Collaboration in course design and delivery

Whether their involvement was focused on recruitment, on CPD or on both, just over half of employers collaborated with colleges and universities in the design, development or delivery of individual courses (Table 6.14). Collaboration with colleges was particularly prominent, with one employer suggesting that they had more 'clout' with further education institutions than with higher education establishments.

Table 6.14: Collaboration with colleges or universities or both in course design and delivery

N=101	***Responses***	***Percentage***
Mainly colleges	11	10.9
Only colleges	15	14.9
Mainly universities	3	3.0
Only universities	8	7.9
Both equally	19	18.8
Other	13	12.9
No response	32	31.7
Total	101	100.0

The range of this involvement was often wide (Table 6.15). Over and above their participation in course design and development, a good many employers shared in the teaching and assessment of students as well as in the oversight and review of programmes.

Table 6.15: Nature of involvement in collaborations with higher education providers

	Responses
Course design and development	43
Course teaching	26
In-house delivery	19
Access to equipment/materials	21
Student assessment	30
Quality assurance	15
Monitoring and review	31
Other	33
Don't know	1
Total (more than one response allowed)	219

The span and intensity of employer involvement was likely to be greater where a premium was placed on learning in the workplace. Where the role and input of the college or university was larger, especially on programmes with students employed by a number of

organisations, it was often difficult for employers to receive the level of monitoring of attendance and progress that they expected. For colleges and universities, all members of a course were to be treated as one. For employers, it was their sponsorship of students that entitled them to separate and regular reporting.

> *Sometimes I've only found out about problems at a college when my employees tell me about them. For example, I've found out that lecturers have been absent or classes cancelled. If this happens regularly we will look to drop that college – we wouldn't continue to work with a college if there were problems.*

> *Issues with our employees are rare but when issues arise we need to know about them quickly. We get weekly electronic reports about attendance and performance. This helps us to respond quickly when there are problems.*

How the balance of these involvements and expectations might change was hard to judge. Most employers looked to maintain their forms and levels of collaboration, at least in the short term. A number saw their hand strengthened in the demands they could make on colleges and universities, especially if they were meeting some or all of the higher fee levels charged to students. This would apply to employer engagement in general as well as in collaboration for workforce development.

With higher tuition fees colleges and universities will have to improve their links with employers. They're going to need to do more to show that their students are employable. They will need to provide more information, advice and guidance about the world of work and they will need to ensure that their students know what to expect when they enter the workplace.

6.8 Summary and conclusions

Employer involvement with courses of higher education taught in further education colleges has a long history. It has been part of the taken-for-granted world of vocational education at the further and higher education levels. This is one reason why the nature and experience of these involvements are not well-understood.

A wide range of organisations – private and public, small and large, local or international in reach – have involvements with colleges. Many of these are geared to the education and training of the workforce rather than to recruitment. With this has come more opportunity for employers to influence the content and delivery of programmes. Whether for recruitment or continuing professional development, these involvements are mainly at the sub-Bachelor levels. The Foundation Degree has often been the main vehicle for these engagements. It has proved popular with the employers interviewed for this study.

Employers work with both colleges and universities to deliver these programmes. A key consideration is that workers and apprentices have access to forms of higher education and higher-level qualifications that are local to the organisation, affordable and customised to the employer, and which are likely to encourage employees to stay with the organisation. In contrast to preferences and requirements governing recruitment or collaboration at the Bachelors' level, there was no evidence of employers wanting to work

with one type of provider. What mattered was the match between the course and needs of the employer.

Organisations might be collaborating mainly with colleges or mainly with universities but these patterns commonly reflected factors to do with history, geography, specialist provision and sometimes, as with partnerships between colleges and universities, the role of key individuals. Indeed, many employers were engaged equally with both types of institution. Some of the larger enterprises had multiple partnerships. Sometimes their relationships were better or easier with some providers than others but, again, this did not identify or align with institutions by sector.

Nor were the costs of provision and collaboration necessarily a major consideration in decisions about which colleges and universities should receive their custom. Most employers expected to continue their present levels of involvement. A number of organisations were considering reducing their reliance on graduate recruitment, with more attention given to growing the education and qualifications of the existing workforce. Colleges and universities were both in a position to benefit from this shift. An expansion of advanced and higher-level apprenticeships was likely to favour colleges in particular, especially where there was already collaboration at the further education levels.

However, an increase in fee levels was expected to strengthen the hand of employers, especially in requiring institutions to report regularly on the attendance and performance of their employees. This posed questions for colleges about how to meet their commitments and obligations to all students and, at the same time, provide employers with levels of service that might be different for the students and courses sponsored by these organisations.

7 Synthesis, discussion and conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This final chapter is divided into three sections: (i) an overview of, and reflections on, the provision of higher education in further education colleges; (ii) a discussion of the key themes emerging from the research (in particular, the degree to which the various strands of evidence are mutually confirmatory); and (iii) a summary of the main conclusions that have emerged.

7.2 Higher education in further education

The most important characteristic of higher education provision in FECs, underlined by the findings of this research project, is its heterogeneity. The high-level distinctions between prescribed and non-prescribed provision, between franchised students and validated programmes or between 'vocational' and 'academic' subjects only scratch the surface; the heterogeneity runs much deeper. On almost every scale – number of HE students, balance of HE and FE provision in individual colleges, number of external validators and accreditors, depth of employer links – there are significant differences.

In positive terms this heterogeneity is closely linked to the flexibility and responsiveness of FECs in planning their HE provision. FECs respond quickly to changes in student demand, employer needs and the wider policy environment (such as the availability of student numbers, whether directly from HEFCE or via a partner HEI, or shifts in regulatory regimes); they have no choice but to respond in this manner. One important finding is the very strong sense in FECs that they operate to different, and more urgent, timescales than HEIs (or HEFCE and BIS); this was graphically described as being in a different 'time-zone'. However, this need to be flexible and responsive also means that it is perhaps more difficult for colleges to develop stable strategic plans with regard to HE provision. A recurring theme of this research is that, within very broad strategic parameters, FECs must be highly adaptable (even, some college managers acknowledge, opportunist). Perhaps a more accurate way to describe this is to draw a distinction between traditional forms of planning based on a limited number of key assumptions (or forecasts) and more adaptable, or market-oriented, forms of planning that need to take account of a much larger number of variables (and also build in more explicit adaptation processes when circumstances change).

Heterogeneity is also linked to less positive characteristics, ambiguity and uncertainty:

- For example, students on non-prescribed courses are often not included in FECs' arrangements for managing higher education. This suggests that many FECs do not adopt a comprehensive definition of their HE provision but define it predominantly in terms of (directly or indirectly) HEFCE-funded provision;

- Students on non-prescribed courses, as a result, are difficult to identify. Many are studying part-time in the evening or on distance learning programmes (and consequently were difficult to survey). Their primary identification appears not to be as HE students studying in FECs (but, alternatively, as taking professional courses or engaging in work-based learning or continuing professional development);

- A third example is the persistence of multiple HEI partnerships; although most FECs formally accept the desirability of having a single HEI partner (or, at any rate, a small number of HEI partners), the need to be highly responsive may make this goal more difficult to achieve in practice;

- Another example is that a significant proportion of students are unclear initially about whether they will be studying in an HEI and FEC (although they are aware they will receive an HEI award). At one level this is simply a matter of bad communications. But it may hint at deeper issues of identity – while a 'uni' student is a familiar category, a 'college' student (who is not an FE student but studying on an HE course) may be less well recognised.

The dynamism of HE provision in FECs, in response to changes in student demand and employer requirements, may undermine the stability of such provision – in these, and other, respects. Indeed, one of the attractions of directly funded HE provision is seen as its greater stability, although this will be less true in the future.

A number of challenges flow from the heterogeneity, flexibility and responsiveness of HE provision in FECs, and of the uncertainty and instability to which these characteristics may give rise. These are, in ascending order of significance:

- First, producing accurate and up-to-date data is always going to be a challenge – because of what might be termed the 'time-zone' effect, the volatility of course provision and the separate reporting of students on prescribed and non-prescribed courses;

- Secondly, managing the inherent tension between the responsiveness of HE provision and the need for developmental strategies is also a key challenge within FECs;

- Thirdly, investing longer-term in HE provision (whether services more targeted on HE students or specialised teaching facilities) presents college managers with difficult choices;

- Fourthly, developing consistent policy prescriptions and frameworks that are equally relevant to all types of HE provision in FECs is a challenge for funders and regulators;

- Finally, recognising that the concept of 'higher education' is inherently problematical in FECs. The formal definition and 'real-world' definition, as perceived by students and employers, may not coincide.

This list of challenges may appear to suggest that HE provision in FECs is a 'special case'. In practice many of these challenges also apply to significant segments of HE provision in HEIs (and may have an increasing impact on the behaviour of HEIs as the Government's higher education reforms proceed). However, the impact on FECs is currently greater – for two reasons. First, with a few exceptions, FECs lack a critical mass of more stable HE provision; and, secondly, FECs are subject to a wider range of external controls, in terms of validation and accreditation and quality assurance, so they are less 'masters of their own fate'. On the other hand, FECs typically have more experience than many HEIs of operating in market-like conditions in developing and managing their FE provision.

7.3 Key themes

The detailed findings under the three strands – the surveys of students and the interview with employers and college managers (and associated HEIs) – have been discussed in the relevant chapters. In this final chapter an attempt will be made to weave them together. In particular, the extent to which HE provision in FECs is (and is perceived to be) distinctive from other forms of HE provision will be addressed. In other words, should HE provision in FECs be regarded as a separate and distinctive sector within the wider HE system?

In broad terms senior managers in FECs, according to the college (and HEI) case studies, believe most strongly that their HE provision forms a distinctive sector while employers, as reported in the survey of their views, appear to be most sceptical (mainly because their focus is on individual institutions, regardless of whether they are FECs or HEIs). Students, as reported in the survey of their characteristics and experiences, are somewhere in the middle.

7.3.1 FEC case studies

Most of the senior FEC managers interviewed in the case-study colleges are clear that their HE provision forms a distinctive sector – in two senses. First, the balance of their course portfolios is heavily vocational (and more directly informed by employer needs). Secondly, their students are categorically different from those enrolled in HEIs, both in terms of their socio-economic characteristics and (perhaps more important) in terms of their academic confidence. For example, in those colleges with a significant number of conventional A-Level students the view is expressed that these students should be directed towards HEIs and not encouraged to progress to HE courses within the college (which, in any case, because of the overwhelmingly vocational orientation of these courses would not be appropriate for 'academic' students). In a few cases it is even argued that some 17 and 18-year-olds, the more confident of not necessarily the most able, should be actively encouraged to leave the 'comfort zone' of the colleges in which they had studied for lower-level qualifications.

This view of HE-in-FE as a distinctive sector is shared by HEI managers responsible for links with FECs. This is especially so in the case of 'pre-1992' universities which see a sharp distinction between their on-campus provision – more 'academic' and aimed at students with 'standard' entry qualifications (often chosen on a highly selective basis) – and courses they validate in FECs – largely 'vocational' and aimed at more local students who had non-standard entry qualifications. However, even in 'post-1992' universities there is little sense that FECs are potential alternatives, and the emphasis remains on progression. In the cases in which universities have restricted franchising activities it has

generally been in response to actual, or potential, challenges with regard to quality rather than because they wished to reduce competition.

The FEC managers who dissent from the view that HE provision in FECs is distinctive do so on two grounds. The first ground is that HE in FECs is not categorically different but part of a spectrum of diversified HE provision. In several cases the need for a coordinated, if not integrated, offer across a city or region was emphasised. The second ground is that HE in FECs should be seen in the wider context of FE provision rather than with reference to the wider HE system. In other words learners should be able to progress from Level 1 up to, and through, the 'barrier' created by the formal transition from FE to HE, to Level 4 and beyond. Although only a small number of these interviewees are prepared to take this argument to its logical conclusion, and regard collaboration (or competition) with HEIs as a secondary matter, they do include senior managers of some of the FECs with the largest number of HE students. Also nearly all colleges seek to minimise the organisational differences between FE and HE, preferring vertical (or subject area) to horizontal (or level) organisation.

7.3.2 Student survey

The heterogeneity of HE students in FECs means that any generalisations must be treated with caution. However, the survey does suggest the ways in which these students are similar to students in HEIs and the ways in which they are differ. In this way the question of whether HE provision in FECs forms a distinctive sector of the wider HE system can be addressed.

The standard student is female, white, single, employed and studying for a Foundation Degree. Although they are non-traditional, in the sense that their parents have no experience of HE, they are not entirely unfamiliar with HE because they have been exposed to HE through the experience of other family members and friends. But other categories of student are still substantial; 25% are studying at Bachelors' level (mainly in creative arts and design, business and management and health-related subjects). Their motives for undertaking HE are overwhelmingly instrumental. In these respects they do not appear substantially to differ from HEI students on equivalent programmes.

However, they do differ in important respects. For 80% going to college was their first choice, although Bachelors' students are more likely also to have applied to an HEI and are far less likely to select a college as their first choice. Also Bachelors' students are more likely to say that they thought they were going to an HEI because their course led to an HEI award. 'Going to uni' is a common phrase that covers a number of different institutional pathways. But the overall impression is of a reasonably discrete pool of applicants who have chosen to study at a college. However, the extent to which this is an informed or unconstrained choice is open to doubt. More than one in ten was unaware of the awarding body for their course. Also they had no strong views about the relative advantages and disadvantages of studying in an FEC or an HEI. Indeed most students lack knowledge or are indifferent to what HEIs can offer because they have little or no experience of HEIs.

To the extent that deliberate reasons for this choice can be identified four seem to be important:

- First, their choice of where to study is geographically constrained, for a number of reasons. In the case of colleges that are geographically remote from their nearest HEIs the reasons are practical. Even in conurbations well endowed with HEIs 'travel to work' times may be significant for students with other commitments. But other, social, material and cultural, factors (especially the perceived cost of living away from home) may also be significant. In any case the 'appeal of localism' is a powerful driver and distinguishes college students' choices from those of the majority of HEI students;

- Secondly, they appear to be opting for academic 'safety'. They may be studying in a familiar environment, although only a minority of students progress from FE to HE within the same college. These are key reasons for not applying to study elsewhere. They also believe they will receive 'more help'. However, contrary to the views of college managers, they do not believe that FECs necessarily have closer links with employers. Nor do students at FECs get substantially more teaching contact hours than their peers in HEIs;

- Thirdly, their experience is more course-based than college-based. Whether this reflects a positive choice, as college managers assert, or is the result of more limited college-wide facilities for HE students is not clear. The strongly vocational orientation of HE provision in FECs suggests that it may be, if not a positive choice, at least accepted by students. However, the lower scores given by college students for 'learning environment' in our survey and in the National Student Survey may indicate this is not the case;

- Finally, they believe that going to college will be more 'affordable'. However, there is little evidence that the direct cost of study, in the form of tuition fees, is a significant choice factor. This is not surprising because the overall cost is at least double the current fee. Of course, for those students on Bachelors' courses the fee differential compared to HEIs is small. This suggests that the overall cost may be a more important factor, in terms of other expenses such as living away from home (although they also believe that studying at college may restrict opportunities for employment). Also those individuals deterred from study because of the cost would not be attending college (and are not covered in our survey).

In summary, therefore, although the profile and views of HE students in FECs are distinctive, there is also evidence that they share many attributes and attitudes with students in HEIs.

7.3.3 Employer interviews

The views expressed by employers do not suggest that they regard HE provision in FECs as a discrete sector within the wider HE system. Although they recognise the diversity of HE, this is likely to be understood in terms of what specific courses and individual institutions rather than categories of institution are able to offer them. On the whole they are reluctant, or unable, to generalise about the differences between FECs and HEIs. In answers to many questions the most popular choice is 'both equally'.

There are differences of emphasis. Employers are more likely to be involved with FECs than HEIs as providers of elements of courses. This probably reflects the different volumes

and proportions of Foundation Degrees in the two sectors. FECs are also more likely than HEIs to be providers of continuing professional development for employers. Employers also stress the need for flexibility, which may tend to favour FECs. On the other hand HEIs are more important in terms of recruitment than FECs, especially of Bachelors' level students who are regarded by employers as normally being produced by HEIs.

However, 'both equally' is the most popular answer to both these questions, about recruitment of employees and provision of CPD – following in the latter case by 'other', which underlines the extent to which both FECs and HEIs face stiff competition from private training organisations and consultants. The overall impression is that employers attach little weight to whether institutions are FECs or HEIs. If FECs have become more important to employers as providers of HE programmes, a major reason is the development of FDs that have proved to be attractive with employers and are more likely to be offered by FECs than HEIs.

Most employers do not foresee significant changes in their current links with FECs and HEIs, or the balance between them. There is some suggestion that higher fees may encourage some employers to focus more on lower-level programmes, and enhance their own training programmes to allow their employees further to develop their skills.

7.4 Policy implications

The final part of this chapter will consider the policy implications of these findings under four headings: (i) expanding provision; (ii) widening participation; (iii) promoting flexibility; and (iv) encouraging cost-effective delivery.

7.4.1 Expanding provision

During the past decade the number of HE students in FECs has not increased significantly. However, it is important to recognise that, although overall student numbers have been controlled throughout this period (and capped since 2009-10), this was a time of rapid expansion of student numbers in HEIs. Many HEIs were able to bid successfully to HEFCE for additional student numbers which they then were able to share with their partner FECs. But the bulk of the expansion was concentrated in HEIs. So the recent past may not be a guide to future potential.

More significant perhaps is the fact that, in the case-study colleges, future growth is anticipated – although this wish is perhaps in reaction to the recent cap on student numbers that has had the effect of stifling development of the course portfolio, and growth targets are typically modest. In several cases the desire appears to be to secure a sufficient critical mass of HE students to achieve both economies-of-scale and improvements in academic quality and the student experience. Several of the case-study colleges believe their current provision is sub-optimal.

A small number of FECs with substantial numbers of HE students do have a record of substantial growth; these colleges have also been most active in seeking degree-awarding powers. So the future pattern could be of a small number of FECs experiencing rapid growth against a background of slower, more evolutionary, growth in most FECs with a stake in HE. However, in both cases growth will depend on the Government's overall

approach to student numbers in HE (and, in particular, whether the margin of 'contestable' student places will be increased) and on the evolution of the regulatory regime.

The evidence of the student survey suggests that there is sufficient demand to sustain a degree of expansion, although it is important to recognise the doubts about the extent to which students are making informed choices between FECs and HEIs. As has already been stated, four out of five applicants put colleges as their first choice, although for a significant proportion of students there is no alternative because they apply only to their local college. For many of them accessibility is likely to be a more important consideration than the type of institution they attend. However, in the case of Foundation Degrees (which account for the majority of undergraduate students and depend on active employer involvement) the overall state of the economy could be a constraining factor. A quarter of Bachelors' candidates have also applied to HEIs. If student numbers in HEIs continue to be restricted it is likely that more candidates would be displaced into FECs. The student survey also suggests that affordability is an important choice factor but that it is defined in broader terms than the level of tuition fees.

7.4.2 Widening participation

There is evidence from both the case-study FECs (and their partner HEIs) and from the student survey that HE provision in colleges does contribute to widening participation. Partner HEIs, in particular, stress this contribution – although 'pre-1992' universities may see the maintenance of links with FECs as discharging their responsibility with regard to widening participation, while 'post-1992' universities are more likely to emphasise the role such links play in developing networks of progression.

It is important to recognise in what respects that contribution is made more and less strongly.

College managers assert that their HE students are older, more likely to be part-time and also more likely to come from families with no prior experience of higher education than students in HEIs. This characterisation is not entirely supported by the results of the student survey. It is true that many students on HE courses in FECs, although formally full-time, appear also to be in (fairly) full-time employment – to the extent that they may be confused about their status. It is also true that the parents of HE-in-FE students are less likely to have had experience of HE, although this is not necessarily true of other family members (and may partly be explained by generational shifts in the scale and penetration of HE). But in some other important respects students on HE courses in FECs appear to be more 'standard' than is commonly supposed (or is asserted by college managers). The differences at any rate appear to be ones of emphasis rather than categorical differences. So it would be difficult to build a case for FECs' major contribution to widening participation solely in terms of the socio-economic characteristics of their students on HE courses.

However, in three other important respects FECs are able to attract students who might not otherwise have continued on to HE:

- First, they provide HE that is more 'local' and therefore accessible. This is especially the case in more sparsely populated areas that are poorly served by HEIs. But it also appears to be true in more densely populated urban areas. Potential students are less mobile for a wide range of reasons. They may have

caring commitments; they may wish for other reasons to live at home and cannot afford daily fares; or they may be reluctant to cross the invisible frontiers that exist in all large conurbations. For such students the choice is to study in an FEC or not at all. So FECs reach students HEIs, literally, cannot reach;

- Secondly, FECs provide a more supportive, and more familiar, environment for students who might struggle to thrive in larger HEIs. Although lack of academic self-confidence (and ambition?) is clearly one factor, it is misleading to accept a 'deficit', or 'remedial', model as the only explanation for the preferences of these students. There is a range of other motives. For example, some students, in particular older students, may see little attraction in a 'uni' environment shaped by the needs of 19 to 21-year-olds and prefer instead a more 'working' environment. Certainly it would be wrong to jump to the conclusion that students taking HE courses in FECs are necessarily weaker in academic terms than students in HEIs;

- Thirdly, the strongly vocational orientation of HE in most FECs appears to be attractive to students with prior vocational qualifications and tightly focused vocational goals. For such students some of the benefits of studying in HEIs – for example, opportunities for inter-disciplinary study or being taught by active researchers – may count for less. It is likely that as modern apprenticeships and higher skills programmes develop further the number of students following this more strictly vocational route into and through HE will increase.

In conclusion, FECs do have a substantial role to play in contributing to widening participation in HE. But our findings suggest that it is important to unpack that contribution.

7.4.3 Promoting flexibility

HE provision in FECs is more flexible in some respects, but more rigid in others.

It is more flexible in several ways:

- First, FECs are more familiar than many HEIs with operating in a less stable funding environment. Various forms of output funding have been standard with regard to FE courses for many years, in contrast to the more predictable unit funding that has prevailed in the HE system. As a result colleges have greater experience of having to adapt their portfolios by offering new courses and closing existing courses on a timescale that would be less usual in HEIs. It is also important to note that much of their HE provision is an extension of their FE provision and subject to the same dynamics;

- Secondly, FECs typically offer a range of HE 'products' – leading to different awards, full and part-time, prescribed and non-prescribed – to match student and employer demands. Although this heterogeneity of course provision poses challenges in terms of efficient operation, it does build-in flexibility;

- Thirdly, FECs have lower costs, particularly in terms of staff but also buildings and equipment. As a result, when contemplating changes in their portfolio, 'tooling-up' costs may be more limited – and, therefore, less of a barrier. This matter will be discussed in a greater detail in the next section.

However, HE provision in FECs is currently less flexible because nearly all these courses are subject to external validation or accreditation. Courses must be validated by a degree-awarding body, typically a partner HEI; or colleges are permitted by partner HEIs to offer courses on a franchised basis; or courses are accredited by a professional or employer-led regulatory body; or colleges teach a prescribed curriculum and students are then entered for externally set examinations. Except in the last case, which generally applies to non-prescribed provision, colleges must conform to timescales set by validating and accrediting bodies.

As the number of colleges with their own degree-awarding powers increases, this inflexibility will be mitigated. But the evidence of our research suggests that many FECs with limited stakes in HE are unlikely to apply for degree-awarding powers, at any rate in the immediate future. Degree-awarding powers are seen as incurring additional (and unnecessary) costs and also potentially additional barriers in terms of lengthening time-scales before courses can be approved. But, even if the number of colleges successfully seeking degree-awarding powers accelerates, a substantial number of HE courses in FECs will remain subject to external control. However, it is important to recognise that HEIs are also subject to accreditation by professional and employer-led regulatory bodies.

7.4.4 Encouraging cost-effective delivery

There is a widespread conviction among college managers that the cost of delivering HE courses is lower in FECs than in HEIs. Although there have been no systematic comparisons of costs on a like-for-like basis, the balance of probability is that costs are actually lower in FECs. All the colleges in our sample cost HE provision on the same basis as FE provision, and HE courses are expected to make a similar contribution to meeting overhead costs. There is no evidence that colleges are inclined to treat HE provision as a 'loss leader', despite the fact that it is often regarded as (a) adding to the colleges' reputation; and (b) being funded, currently, on a more stable basis than FE provision.

The main reason for these lower costs is the different staff profile:

- First, college lecturers teach for more hours and have shorter holidays than HEI lecturers. There is no expectation that college lecturers will undertake research because FECs are exclusively focused on teaching (and supporting students in other ways). However, there are pressures from teaching staff in FECs to be given the opportunity, and the time, to engage in scholarship and participate in disciplinary communities. There is also an expectation that college lecturers will develop links with employers. Both activities take time, although not as much as a fully developed research commitment;

- Secondly, average staff costs are lower, mainly because there are fewer promoted and higher-grade posts than in HEIs. Typically course management is leaner. However, this difference can be partly explained by the fact that some essential services are 'bought in' from HEIs – in relation to course development in the case of franchised courses, and quality assurance in the case of both franchised and validated courses. Logically, therefore, at least part of the 'top-slice' retained by HEIs in the case of indirectly funded provision should be added to delivery costs in FECs. FECs with their own degree-awarding powers will incur additional costs;

- Finally, college lecturers do not enjoy as much latitude as HEI staff in the organisation of their work. FECs are more managed environments, and their lecturers comprise a more managed academic workforce. In most colleges lecturers teach on both FE and HE courses, which encourages more cost-effective delivery (as well as producing other educational benefits).

Although HE students are taught in smaller groups, they do not necessarily have substantially more contact hours. So any cost advantage FECs enjoy should not be overstated. The lower costs associated with their more cost-effective staff profiles are likely to be significantly reduced by smaller class sizes than in HEIs and similar contact hours.

In addition FECs have other cost advantages. Their premises costs are generally lower, although it is important to recognise that colleges have benefited from grant-funded capital grants while HEIs have had to depend on borrowings to finance capital investment. The cost of their learning infrastructures also tend to be lower, although this is reflected in less favourable scores in the National Student Survey.

In conclusion, HE provision in FECs is probably more cost-effective than HE provision in HEIs. But three qualifications need to be made. First, it is not clear that on a like-for-like basis FECs are more efficient than HEIs – for example, if Foundation Degree costs in both sectors were compared or research costs stripped out. Although FECs would probably still be cheaper, their cost advantage would be limited. Secondly, FECs are able to benefit from economies-of-scale generated by the critical mass produced by their FE provision (which, with the exception of a few ‘mixed economy’ colleges, is their predominant activity). Thirdly, the current relative balance of costs reflects the present scale and configuration of HE provision in FECs. If this provision were to be on a much larger scale and also more free standing (i.e. less dependent on HEIs for key academic services), the balance would be different. However, these effects should not be exaggerated. If FECs do have lower costs these are not reflected in lower fees for Bachelors’ courses than those charged by HEIs. The fee differential between FECs and HEIs is largely explained by their different course portfolios; FECs have proportionately more students on FD and HN courses, for which HEIs also tend to charge lower fees.

Concluding remarks

At present HE provision in FECs provides an important element in the overall diversity of the HE system. It makes significant contributions, particularly in terms of widening participation, flexible (and cost-effective) delivery and employer engagement. But it generally complements rather than competes with HE provision in HEIs. It is striking how this complementarity has been maintained against a background of ‘uneven development’ of detailed policy. In some areas it has been possible to observe convergence of policy in FE and HE, while in other areas there has been divergence (notably in terms of quality assurance).

Some of the key messages that come through in this research reinforce this broad conclusion. First, ‘localism’ is a pervasive theme; FECs are able to reach students whom even the most access-oriented HEIs find it difficult to reach. Secondly, HE provision in FECs is highly diverse – ranging from ‘quasi-university’ provision in colleges with separate and distinctive university centres (or even campuses), to large general-purpose colleges

which emphasise seamless all-through provision regardless of level. Thirdly, HE provision in FECs is very resilient, reflecting the flexibility and adaptability discussed earlier in this concluding chapter. Finally, attitudes in both FECs and HEIs are relatively conservative – which may partly reflect a preoccupation with working within the existing 'rules of the game' (while accepting that these 'rules' are subject to frequent revision), but may also reflect a deeper belief in the complementarity, and essential stability, of the respective missions of FECs and HEIs.

However, if Government policies were to produce a 'step-change' in HE-in-FE, whether quantitatively by reducing the number of student places in HEIs or qualitatively by radically modifying current regulatory regimes for quality assurance and institutional recognition, the nature of this provision could change significantly. In the longer term it might come to resemble an identifiable sector of HE along the lines of community colleges in the United States. But this would represent a substantial transformation – and a lengthy journey. It is not yet clear whether the long-term direction of policy will continue to be different forms of incrementalism, as new forms of HE are added to a relatively stable core (a policy process with deep historical roots), or whether a more fundamental challenge will be mounted to the dominance of HE by a traditional, and relatively expensive, model of three-rear residential Honours degrees (for which there are limited historical precedents).

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9 Technical appendix

The first stage of the research consisted of selecting 25 colleges which would form our case study colleges. Interviews were conducted with the principles of these colleges and other senior managers, plus some of their HEI partners. In addition, the case study colleges formed our sampling frame for the student survey. The following gives more details of our approach.

9.1 Selecting the case study colleges

A list, derived from integrated HESA and ILR data from 2006-07, was supplied to GfK NOP of all FE colleges with any HE students – 299 in all. The first stage was to remove from the frame all colleges with fewer than 400 HE students, on the grounds that it would be difficult to obtain the required 100 interviews from a college with fewer than 400 HE students in total. This reduced the frame to 150 colleges.

25 colleges were then selected with a probability proportional to size, using a simple one in n approach by applying a constant sampling fraction down a cumulative total of HE students. A small number of changes had to be made – partly because some colleges would have been extremely difficult for the field workers to visit, and in one case because the luck of sampling had produced two colleges in the same town. Replacements were chosen in a way to ensure that the regional balance of the sampled colleges matched as closely as possible that of all eligible colleges.

9.2 Selecting the students to be surveyed at the case study colleges

Within each college quotas were set on two variables, to ensure that the achieved sample broadly represented the universe of HE students within each college. These were mode of study – full time or part time – and qualification aim – bachelor degree, other undergraduate (Foundation degrees, Diplomas and Certificates of HE, Higher Nationals) and other higher level (higher level professional/vocational qualifications).

Because the data collection was to be classroom-based it would be impractical to try to obtain a sample of, say, only 5 students in a particular category. Therefore any of the mode of study or qualification aim groups with fewer than 100 students was excluded from the quota setting process.

Quotas were then set for each of the five cells (the two quota variables were treated independently, not interlocked) to be representative of the total student body in all the sampled colleges. To achieve this, adjustments were made to the quotas to compensate for the exclusion of students in quota cells with fewer than 100 students.

The quota targets were then supplied to the fieldworkers.

9.3 The survey of college students

9.3.1 Fieldwork team

A team of five researchers experienced in higher education in further education carried out fieldwork in the 25 selected further education colleges in England; each fieldworker taking responsibility for five colleges.

The fieldworker collected background information from the college website and made an initial visit to the college in the summer term 2011 and:

- gathered information from managers of HE at the college which was recorded in a standard College Case Study Record and passed to the project member conducting the interviews with the college Principal and senior HE manager;
- discussed the targets for the student questionnaires with the higher education manager and possible cohorts to be surveyed in the autumn term; and
- explained that they would aim to conduct telephone interviews with five employers with links to the HE at the college. The college was asked give the employers the employer leaflet, obtain permission for the interview and pass on the contact details.

In the autumn term 2011 arrangements were made for distribution of the questionnaires to student cohorts between 16 October and 30 November.

9.4 Piloting the survey

The questionnaire was piloted in one FE college with two student groups. One group of part-time day, mainly mature students on a professional (Other HE) award and another full- time HND group who were 18-20 years old.

9.5 Conducting the survey

The questionnaire was completed in class under the supervision of the fieldworker and in the presence of the class tutor who introduced the fieldworker. The purpose of the project was briefly explained and the anonymity and confidentiality of the questionnaire were emphasised. The fieldworker answered any queries and collected and batched the questionnaires. Each questionnaire was coded to identify the:

- institution
- mode of funding
- mode of study
- awarding body
- qualification aim

- year of study

and a record was made of the numbers of questionnaires against the targets for the institution.

For each college, targets had been derived (with a total target of 100 in most cases) reflecting the college's provision of HE qualifications below postgraduate level for:

- Bachelor's degrees
- Other Undergraduate (Foundation degrees, Diplomas and Certificates of HE, Higher Nationals)
- Other higher education (higher level professional/vocational qualifications)

and, across the total, for full and part time study.

The aim was to achieve 100 interviews in each case study college to gain an achieved sample of 2,500 students.

9.6 The achieved sample

This achieved sample of 2,500 completed student questionnaires was met, and, in fact, exceeded. The final achieved sample was 2,764 but the composition of the sample was not in line with the quotas supplied by GfK NOP.

In four colleges with smaller amounts of higher education provision, the target was reduced to 50 students and in four of the larger providers of higher education increased to 150.

The targets were initially issued using integrated HESA and ILR data from 2006-07 held by the project team; the final targets were identified in the autumn 2011 using the most up to date validated data made available from HEFCE for 2009-10. However, in some cases the college's profile of provision had changed for 2011-12. The fieldworkers made adjustments across the 25 colleges where possible to address shortfalls or overshoots to individual targets and two additional colleges were chosen to boost the number of students studying part-time and on professional higher level qualifications. The survey period was extended to the second week of December 2011 to take account of college inspections, industrial action, and requests by colleges for rescheduling.

Some difficulties were experienced in matching available cohorts of students to the targets for a variety of reasons. In some colleges, courses which were in the prospectus or had been picked from previous year's statistics to be targeted by the fieldworker were not running due to low demand. In some colleges there was poor attendance at classes that were visited or management information was not up to date with the MIS data showing more students than there were on course at the time. Additionally, some colleges had recently merged causing data problems and difficulty of access. The causes of these mismatches were variable from one college to another. Patterns of change in provision

and growth and decline were not consistent with regard to both type of qualification and mode of study.

As a result, the number of students who completed the survey taking a Bachelor's degree and 'other undergraduate' qualifications was greater than planned, as was the number of full-time students. Consequently, we had fewer students than anticipated taking 'other HE qualifications' and studying part-time.

Students taking 'Other HE

This category of qualification comprised the higher level professional awards identified as 'non prescribed higher education', made by various awarding bodies, fundable by the SFA[15] and returned on the ILR.

It proved very difficult to administer questionnaires to these cohorts. The reasons included:

- higher education qualifications which are not HEFCE funded are commonly managed separately from HEFCE (directly or indirectly) funded provision and are embedded within a subject based organisational structure. In these cases the HE manager or administrator was not usually able to make the arrangements to identify cohorts and it proved very difficult for the fieldworker to make contact with the relevant manager(s);

- the college reporting that SFA funding had been 'withdrawn' and consequently the qualifications were no longer offered or were offered full cost which in turn led to a reduction in demand;

- where courses were offered full cost, staff and/or students were unwilling to agree to lose course time to participate in the survey;

- the courses were all part-time and staff and/or students declined to participate, citing pressure of time to complete the syllabus (this correlates with the short fall in part time numbers); and

- in some of the colleges this category of provision was offered as distance learning and thus the questionnaire could not be administered consistent with the guidelines (i.e. to groups by the fieldworker).

[15] The Agency has the power to fund non-prescribed HE learning aims in Agency funded Providers. Non-prescribed learning aims are those that fall outside the schedule of prescribed learning aims of Higher Education as defined in the Education (Prescribed Learning Aims of Higher Education) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 1998. These higher-level learning aims generally encompass vocational qualifications at Level 4 and above, which may have a primary purpose of confirming occupational competence, or be about preparing for further development, learning or training.2011/12 Learner Eligibility and Contribution rules.Version 2, July 2011, SFA http://readingroom.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/sfa/Learner_Eligibility_and_Contribution_Rules_-_V2_-_July_2011.pdf

Part time students

Many students taking 'other HE qualifications' study part-time and so the lower number of part-time students is related to the smaller achieved sample of students aiming for these qualifications.

It should be noted that definitions of full time and part time differ in the HEFCE and SFA funding methodologies. The SFA defines full time as a programme of study of 450 or more hours of guided learning (GLH)[16] per year. However, HEFCE has a broader definition including hours of study and learning (including in the workplace) as well as tuition[17]. Many of the students on HEFCE funded provision who were full-time were doing work related programmes and only attended college one day per week.

In general it was easier for the HE manager to arrange for access to full-time students to make it time efficient for the fieldworker to visit the college on a limited number of days, this and the pressure on class time for part time provision, encouraged under representation of part timers.

9.7 Survey data

The achieved sample differed significantly from the targets set, which may just reflect greater difficulty in securing cooperation from some types of students than others, but which may also be because the HEFCE figures used to set the targets were two years out of date, and the profile of HE in FE students may have changed significantly over that time. There is certainly anecdotal evidence from the sampled colleges to support this.

However, in terms of weighting there were no hard data to weight to, other than the HEFCE figures, and so this is what was done.

One particular problem concerned qualification aim, where the "other" category should have represented 37% of the total and in fact accounted for only 7.5%. Weighting by a

[16] GLH is defined as: 'All times when a member of staff is present to give specific guidance towards the qualification or module being studied on a programme. This includes lectures, tutorials, and supervised study in for example; open learning centres and learning workshops. It also includes time spent by staff assessing learners' achievements, for example in the assessment of competence for NVQs. It does not include time spent by staff in the day-to-day marking of assignments or homework where the learner is not present. It does not include hours where supervision or assistance is of a general nature and is not specific to the study of the learners'. http://www.theia.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/108B67A4-B90B-4367-8240-C6CF4BDAB9CC/0/singleILRSpecification2011_12v4_03Oct2011.pdf, p 81

[17] A year of programme of study is counted as full-time if it meets **all** of the following criteria:
a. The student is normally required to attend the college, or elsewhere, for periods amounting to at least 24 weeks within the year of programme of study; and during that time they are normally expected to undertake periods of study, tuition, learning in the workplace or sandwich work placement that does not meet the criteria to be sandwich year-out, which amount to an average of at least 21 hours per week; and b. Full-time fees are chargeable for the course for the year http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2011/11_26/HEIFSES 11, annex M

factor of 5 is certainly not recommended, and apart from the impact on precision there has to be real doubt as to whether such a small sub-sample could be representative of the larger one. It was therefore decided that for the purposes of weighting the "other" qualification aim category would be excluded. The survey results for these students are presented elsewhere.

This produced the following weighting targets:

	weighting targets	unweighted actuals
Full time	60%	71%
Part time	40%	29%
Bachelor degree	29%	35%
Other undergraduate	71%	65%

9.8 Discussion groups with students

In each college, the fieldworker made arrangements to hold one discussion group to probe and illustrate some of the key questions in the questionnaire. Groups were selected with the HE manager or course tutor to represent a range of:

- qualifications
- subject areas
- year of study
- mode of study.

This discussion was held either after a cohort had completed the questionnaires or, if this was the preference of the college, with a separate group. The discussion was informal and covered the group members:

- reasons for choosing their course
- reasons for studying at that college rather than elsewhere
- their experiences and self perceptions as students
- funding.

A total of 21 discussions were completed involving roughly 300 students. The groups – some of mixed modes, years and subjects – included 1st, 2nd and 3rd years; full and part time; Higher Nationals, Foundation Degrees As, Foundation Degrees Scs, BAs, BScs, Professional awards; single subject qualifications and combinations of subjects.

Written notes of the discussion against topic headings were made for qualitative analysis.

10 Decisions and experiences of students on non-prescribed courses

10.1 Introduction

This appendix is based on 207 responses to the student survey from those on non-prescribed courses. The students surveyed were drawn from the 25 case study colleges, and an additional two colleges. The students were given a self –completion paper questionnaires which was distributed and collected in class by our researchers between October and December 2011.

The number of students participating in the survey taking non-prescribed courses was lower than anticipated. Consequently, these 207 are unlikely to be representative of students taking such courses. It was decided, therefore, to exclude these students from the analysis in Chapter 5 but to report the unweighted findings separately in this appendix. As a result, we cannot directly compare the findings reported in Chapter 5 with those report here, except in very general terms. In addition, given the small number of students, no cross tabulations have been undertaken.

10.2 The characteristics of the students surveyed

10.2.1 Socio-economic characteristics of the students surveyed

Tables 10.1 and 10.25 provide some basic information about the students included in the survey. Table 10.1 shows that the majority of students surveyed were:

- female;
- aged 25 and over;
- white;
- were married or living with a partner;
- in paid full-time employment;
- non-traditional students whereby neither their mother and/or father had completed or was studying for an higher education qualification;
- had some exposure to higher education because at least one of their brother or sisters, sons or daughters, partner or spouse, or other member of their household had completed or was studying for a higher education qualification; and
- identified themselves by their occupation rather than as a student.

Table 10.1: The Socio-economic characteristics of the students surveyed

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
Male	41	20
Female	165	80
Not answered	1	+
Age		
21 and under	13	6
22 - 25	45	22
26 and over	147	71
Not answered	2	1
Ethnicity		
White	191	92
Mixed	2	1
Asian	5	2
Black	5	2
Other	2	1
Not answered	2	1
Family Type		
Single with no children	70	34
Single with children	19	9
Married with no children	56	27
Married with children	60	29
Not answered	2	1
Social Class of main income earner[1]		
Managerial and professional	143	69
Intermediate	25	12
Routine manual and service	33	16
Not answered	6	3
Employment status of student		
In paid work full-time	144	70
In paid work part-time	34	16
Unemployed but seeking work	6	3
Long-term sick or disabled	0	0
Retired from paid work	1	+
Looking after the home/family	9	4
Something else	5	2

Characteristic	N	%
Not answered	8	4
Highest entry qualification		
Undergraduate or higher	90	43
2 "A" Levels or equivalent	77	37
GCSE or equivalent or lower	40	19
Whether a traditional student[2]		
Traditional	63	30
Non-traditional	114	55
Don't know / not applicable / not answered	30	14
Whether exposed to HE[3]		
Exposed	140	68
Not exposed	56	27
Don't know / not applicable / not answered	11	5
Living arrangements		
Live alone	28	14
With parents	42	20
With partner/spouse and/or children	129	62
With friends/students in rented accommodation (not provided by university/college)	6	3
In university/college provided accommodation	0	0
Not answered	2	1
Identity[4]		
College student	16	8
University/uni student	1	+
By occupation/work	165	80
Parent	20	10
Not answered	5	2
All	207	100

1. 43% of respondents are the main income earner; 54% someone else is main income earner; and 2% of respondents did not answer the question.

2. A traditional student is defined as one who reports that their mother and/or father has completed or is studying for a HE qualification.

3. A student is defined as exposed to HE if at least one of their brother or sister, son or daughter, partner or spouse, another member of household or immediate family has completed or is studying for a HE qualification.

4. Identity is defined by response to the following question: "If you met a stranger at a party, how would you describe yourself?"

10.1.1 The course characteristics of the students surveyed

Table 10.2 shows that most students surveyed were:

- aiming for a professional qualification;
- studied part-time;
- studying business and administrative studies and the law;
- taught mainly at their college rather than their workplace;
- on a full-cost course; and
- believed that their qualification was awarded by 'another organisation'.

Table 10.2: The characteristics of the course

Characteristic	N	%
Qualification studying for		
Bachelor's degree	1	+
Foundation degree	0	0
HNC/HND	3	1
Diploma / Certificate of HE	51	25
Professional qualification	138	67
Other	14	7
Awarding body		
My college	5	2
A university	22	11
BTEC/Edexcel	5	2
City and Guilds	0	0
Another organisation	165	80
Don't know	9	4
Not answered	1	+
Mode of study		
Full-time	10	5
Part-time	196	95
Not answered	1	+
Subject of study*		
Medicine, subjects allied to medicine etc	0	0
Physical sciences etc	0	0
Engineering and technology	0	0

Characteristic	N	%
Social studies etc	6	3
Business and administrative studies and Law	153	74
Creative arts and design	0	0
Education	8	4
Other and combined subjects	39	19
Not answered	1	+
Year of study		
1	96	46
2	38	18
3	65	31
Not available	8	4
Where mainly taught		
At a college	200	97
At place of work	4	2
Both	1	+
Not answered	2	1
Course funder		
Direct from HEFCE	22	11
Franchise from HEI	0	0
SFA	50	24
Full Cost	135	65
All	207	100

+ indicates that some respondents reported the answer, but it was less than half a percent of responses.

*subjects were grouped as follows:

Medicine & dentistry + subjects allied to medicine + veterinary science. agriculture & related subjects

Physical sciences + biological sciences + mathematical and computer sciences + architecture, building & planning

Engineering and technology

Social studies + mass communications and documentation + historical and philosophical studies + languages

Business and administrative studies + law

Creative arts and design

Education

Other + a combination of subjects

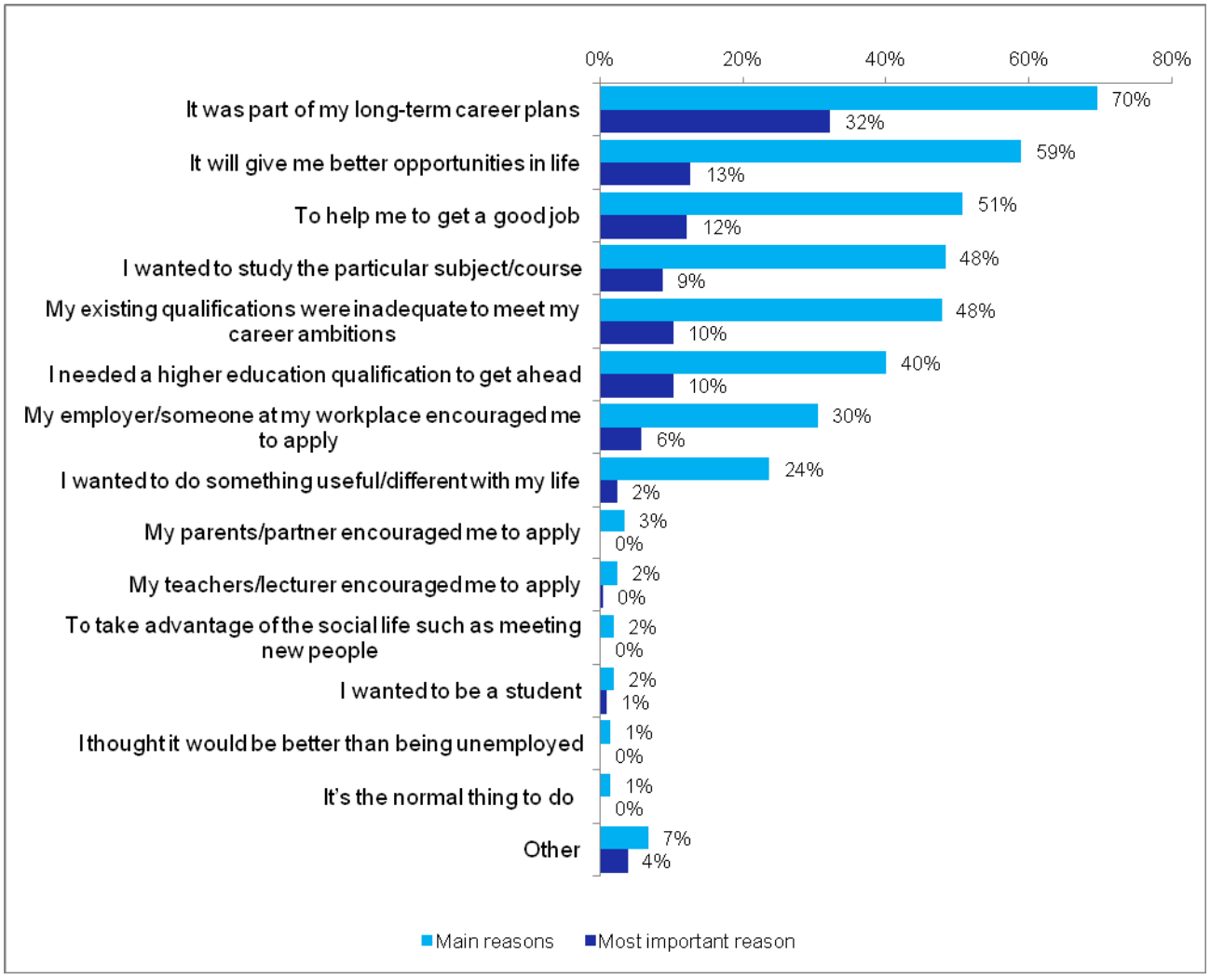
According to the students' college's records all were aiming for a professional qualification, but interestingly, a sizable minority of students believed that were studying towards a diploma or certificate in HE.

10.3 Choices and decision making

10.3.1 Reasons for entering higher education

Students' motivations for participating in higher education were primarily instrumental. The majority were concerned with pursuing higher education as part of their long-term career plan (70%), improving their life opportunities (59%), and getting a good job (51%) (Figure 10.1). Moreover, there was a large degree of consensus among the students surveyed in their reasons for entering higher education.

Figure 10.1 Main reasons and most important reason for wanting to do higher education



Base: All students (N=207)

Percentages for the most important reason exclude 2 invalid responses (N=207)

Students' most important reasons for entering higher education, which drove their decision to enter higher education, were that higher education was part of their long-term career plan (32%), would give them better opportunities in life (13%), and help them get a good job (12%) (Figure 10.1). These were also the most significant reasons for students studying other qualifications, reported in Chapter 5.

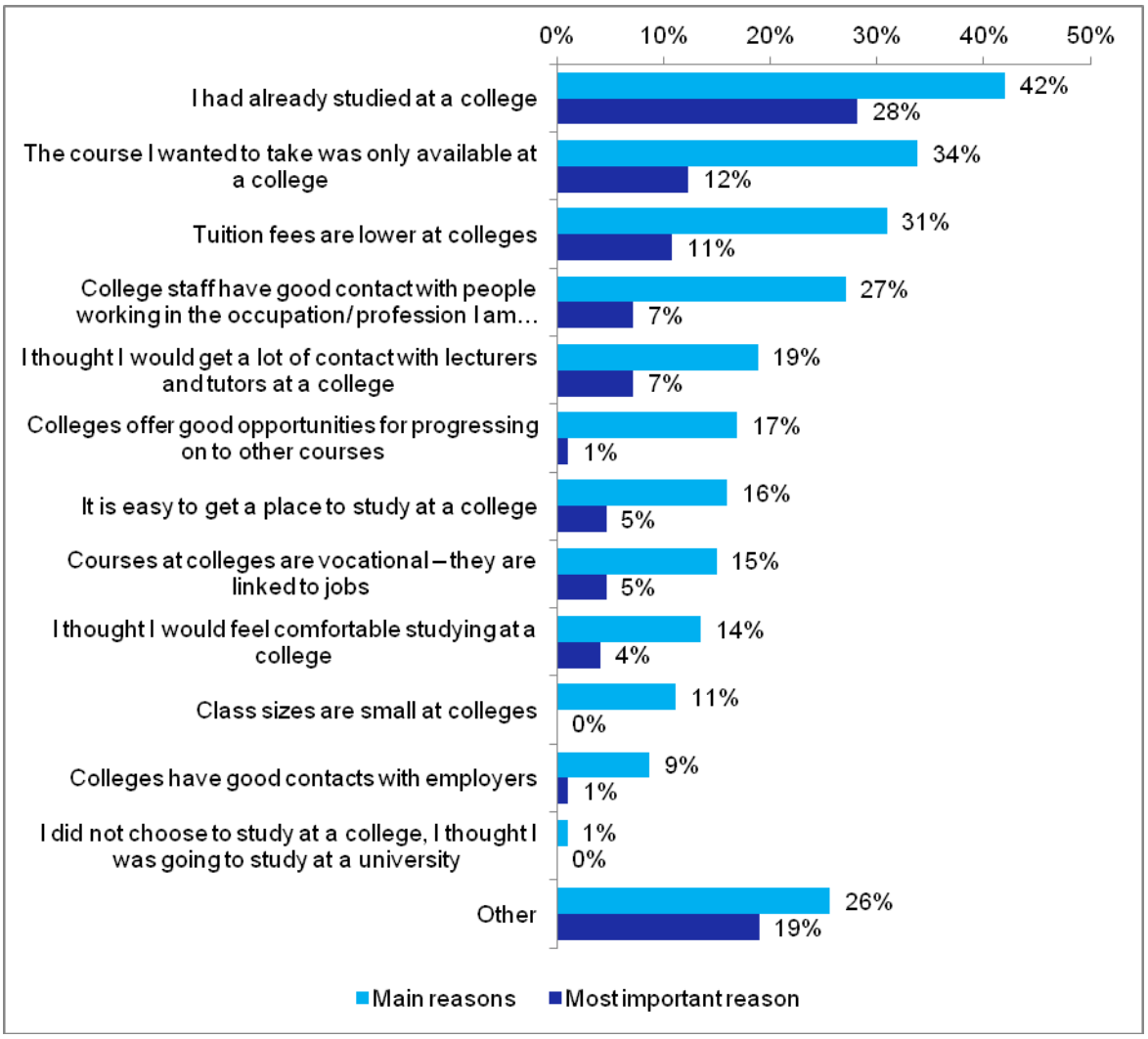
10.3.2 Reasons for taking a course at a college rather than a university and their attitudes towards colleges and universities

Students' reasons for studying at a college rather than a university (Figure 10.2) were much more varied and diffuse compared with their reasons for entering higher education. The majority of students did not identify any single reason for studying at college rather than a university, suggesting that numerous factors influenced them. Students' four most popular reasons were associated with the college offer, and the familiarity and safety of colleges' learning environment. These included:

- having already studied at a college (42%);
- the course they wanted to take only being available at a college (34%);
- lower tuition fees at a college (31%); and
- that college staff have good contacts with people working in the occupation/profession they were interested in (27%).

These broadly reflect the reasons given by students aiming for other undergraduate qualifications, reported in Chapter 5, except for the last reason. However, there was no dominant most important reason for students selecting a college over a university. Most often, students' decision to opt for a college was driven by their previous experience of studying at a college (28%) (Figure 10.2).

Figure 10.2 Main reasons and most important reason for deciding to take a course at a college rather than a university



Base: All students (N=207)

Percentages for the most important reason exclude 12 invalid responses (N=195)

When asked to identify some of the potential advantages of studying at a college rather than a university, or vice versa, between a third and two-thirds of the students surveyed were unable to do so because either they neither agreed nor disagreed with a particular statement, or did not know (Figure 10.3). And overall, students did not hold strong views on the relative merits of university and college higher education provision. Of the most strongly held views, none suggest that colleges offered better opportunities than universities in terms of employers' preferences and campus life.

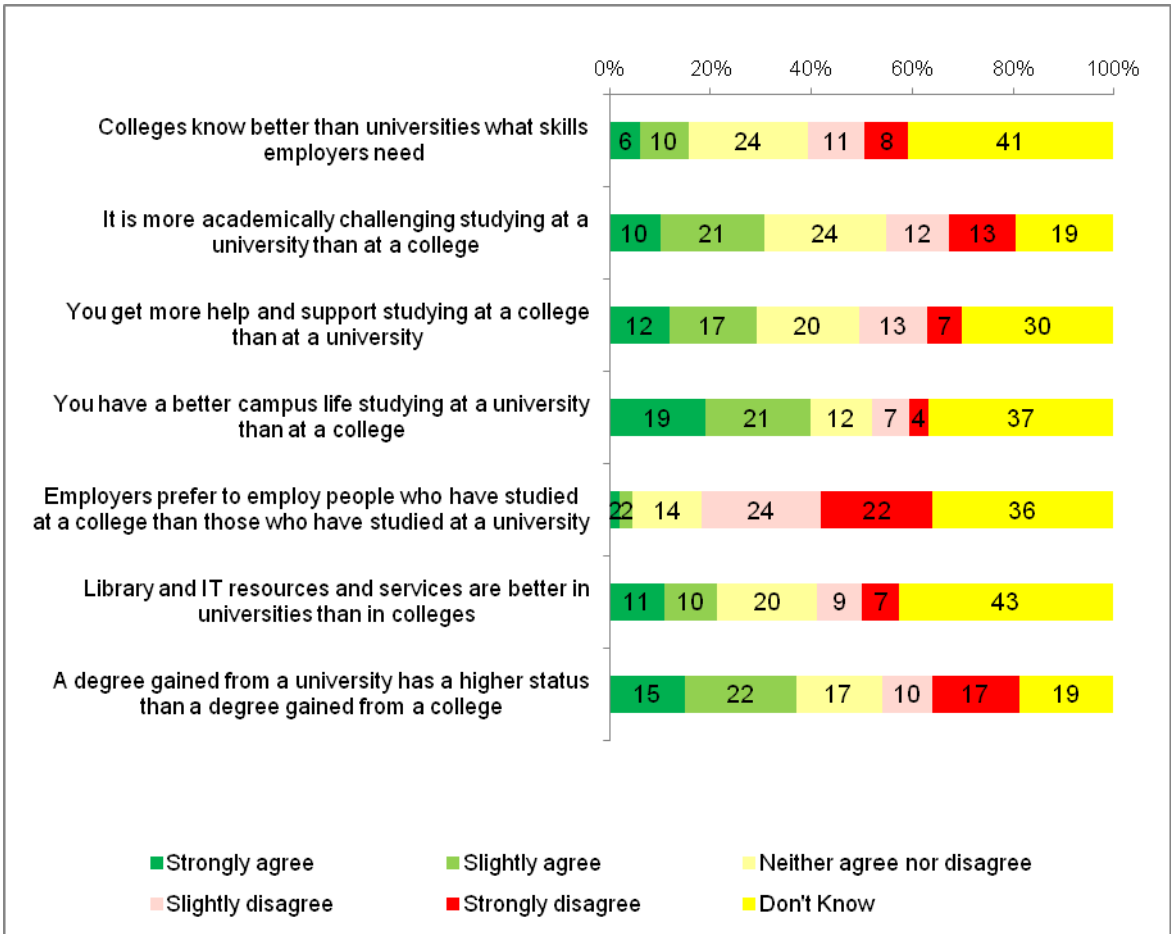
First, looking at the employment consequences and prospects of studying at a college rather than a university (Figure 10.3). As we have seen, these drove students' decision to enter higher education and as discussed below, largely determined their choice of course and college. Yet, only a very small minority agreed (4%) with the statement 'employers prefer to employ people who have studied at a college than those who have studied at a university', with students most often neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the statement or

not knowing (50%). Most frequently, students agreed (37%) with the statement 'a degree gained from a university has a higher status than a degree gained from a college' with just 27% disagreeing, while 36% were undecided or did not know. Only a minority (16%) agreed that 'colleges know better than universities what skills employers needs' while 18% disagreed, and the majority neither agreed nor disagreed or did not know (65%). So there is little evidence of students perceiving colleges as giving them a labour market advantage compared with university graduates.

Turning to the experience of studying at a college rather than a university, here students' attitudes were more mixed (Figure 10.3). In colleges' favour, but not by much, students most frequently agreed that 'you get more help and support studying at a college than at a university' (29% agreed, 20% disagreed) but most were undecided or did not know. Conversely, in universities favour, students most often believed that 'you have a better campus life studying at a university than at a college' (40% agreed, 11% disagreed), but more often they were unsure or did not know. In addition, more students agreed (21%) rather than disagreed (16%) with the statement that 'Library and IT resources and services are better in universities than in colleges' but students were more likely to neither agree nor disagree with the statement, or not know (63%). This finding echoes those in the National Student Survey, as discussed in Chapter 2. Students were more likely to agree (31%) than disagree (25%) that 'it is more academically challenging to study at a university than at a college', but most often they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, or did not know (43%). So there was limited evidence of students perceiving colleges as giving them a better learning and student experience than universities.

These findings suggest a considerable lack of awareness and indifference about the claimed differences between universities and colleges amongst these students, and more so than those taking other undergraduate qualifications, discussed in Chapter 5. The students surveyed seemed unaware of colleges' distinguishing features when compared with those offered by higher education institutions. They did not necessarily appreciate elements of the distinctive missions of colleges, as espoused in the interviews with college managers and their partner higher education institutions as discussed in Chapter 4, and in the literature discussed in Chapter 2. This brings into question the extent to which students were actually making an informed choice when opting to study in a college rather than a university.

Figure 10.3 Differences between colleges and universities

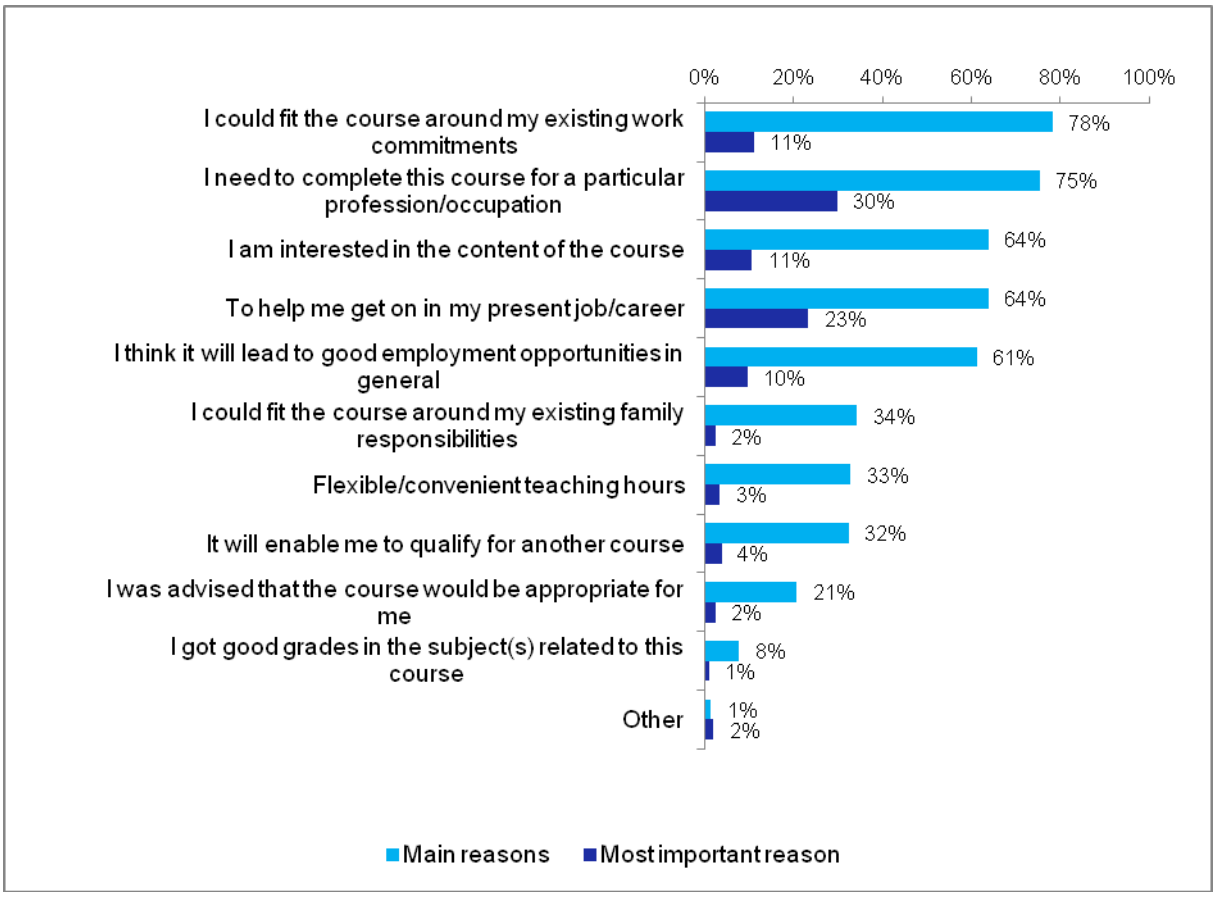


Base: All respondents answering each question (N ranges from 201 to 203)

10.3.3 Reasons for selecting their course, and their particular college

Why did students choose their course and their particular college? The most popular reasons for choosing to study their course were pragmatic, employment or career-related reasons, and interest in the course (Figure 10.4). There was a large degree of consensus in their reasoning which reflect their the employment circumstances and family commitments (Table 10.1) The majority of students selected their courses because they could fit the course around their existing work commitments (78%); they needed to complete the course for a particular profession or occupation (75%); they were interested in its' content (64%); it could help them get on in their present job/career (64%); and they thought it would lead to good employment opportunities in general (61%). The weight given to the first two reasons by these students is far greater than those taking other undergraduate qualifications, reported in Chapter 5. This is not surprising given that the majority of students on non-prescribed courses studied part-time but had full-time jobs. Given the professional nature of these students' qualification aim, it also is perhaps not surprising that their most important reason for choosing their course was that they needed to complete the course for a particular profession or occupation (30%).

Figure 10.4 Main reasons and most important reason for choosing the course you are on

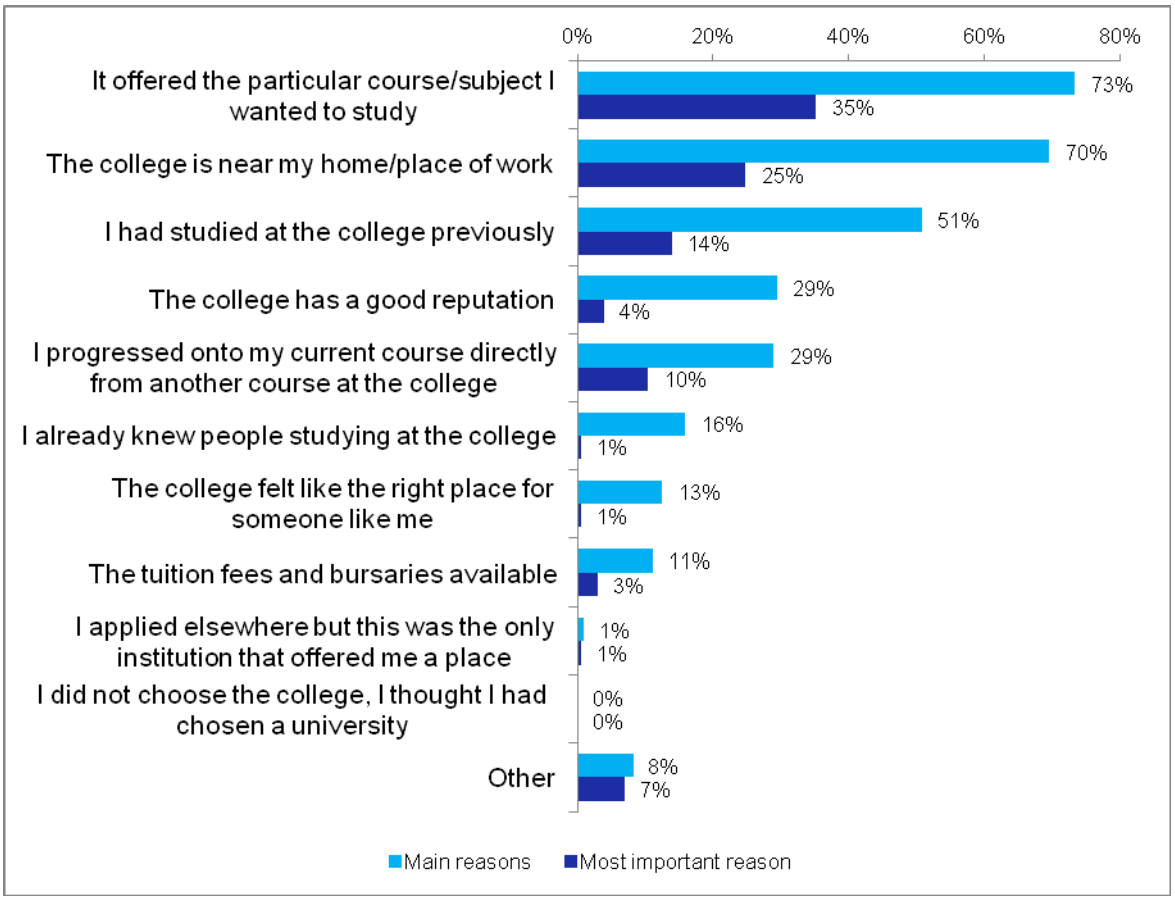


Base: All students (N=207)

Percentages for the most important reason exclude 2 invalid responses (N=205)

Turning to students' reasons for choosing the college where they were studying (Figure 10.5). The majority identified the following three reasons - their college offered the particular course/subject they wanted to study (73%); the college was near their home/place of work (70%); and they had studied at the college previously (51%). These convenience factors were very significant for these predominately part-time student, and more so compared with students taking other undergraduate qualifications reported in Chapter 5. The vast majority (94%) of these students had less than an hour's journey to college, and most frequently (64%) their journey time was less than ½ an hour.

Figure 10.5 Main reasons and most important reason for choosing the college where you are studying now

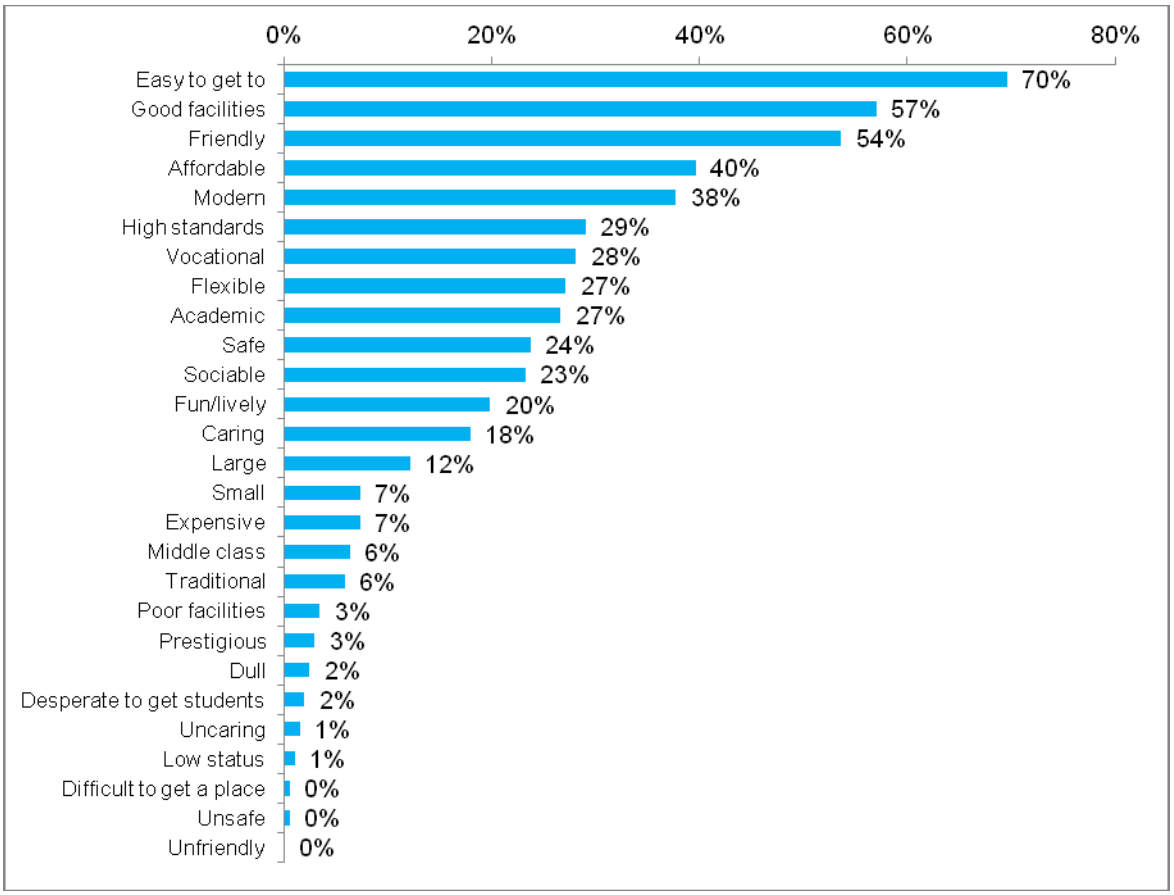


Base: All students (N=207)

Percentages for the most important reason exclude 6 invalid responses (N=201)

When students were asked to characterise the college where they were studying (Figure 10.6), the majority rated their college: as easy to get to (70%), with good facilities (57%) and friendly (54%). Despite the clear vocational nature of the students' qualification aim, a similar proportion of students described their college as vocational (28%), and as academic (27%).

Figure 10.6 Student descriptions of their college



Base: All students (N=207)

10.3.4 An informed choice?

The vast majority (95%) of the students on non-prescribed course reported that their course was their first choice. To what extent were these students making an informed choice? Unlike their peers studying for other undergraduates qualifications, reported in Chapter 5, nearly all of these students knew that they would be studying at a college and not a university. And all had applied for their course directly to their college. And unlike other undergraduates, they were far less likely to apply elsewhere to study: eight per cent had applied to other colleges and just four per cent to a university. Given the small numbers involved, no further analysis was possible.

10.4 Experiences of studying and attitudes to study

10.4.1 How hard student had to work

So what were college students' actual experiences of studying? The vast majority (98%) were taught mainly at their college rather than at their place of work. Just over a half of students surveyed (53%) had to work harder than they expected, and for the remaining 47% the level of work was as expected, nobody had to work less hard than expected.

10.4.2 Hours of study

As previously noted, 95% of students were studying part-time. They had an average of 7 hours of face-to-face contact a week, and spent an additional average of 7 hours studying independently.

10.4.3 Attitudes to study

Turning now to the attitudes towards study and the educational experiences of the students surveyed (Figures 10.7). Generally, students had positive teaching and learning experiences in terms of their overall college experience; their assessment of the college environment; and their individual daily experiences of being a student and in terms of the teaching and learning help and support they received.

Regarding students' overall college experience (Figure 10.7), the vast majority were content and agreed with the following statements:

- 'my course is intellectually stimulating' (88%);
- 'I am satisfied with the quality of the course' (87%);
- 'my experience of studying had been positive' (81%); and
- 'my course represents good value for money' (71%).

Students' evaluation of the college environment was more mixed. The vast majority (83%) disagreed with the statement 'library and IT facilities are not good enough for my needs', but only 38% agreed and 61% disagreed that 'specialist equipment and facilities are good'.

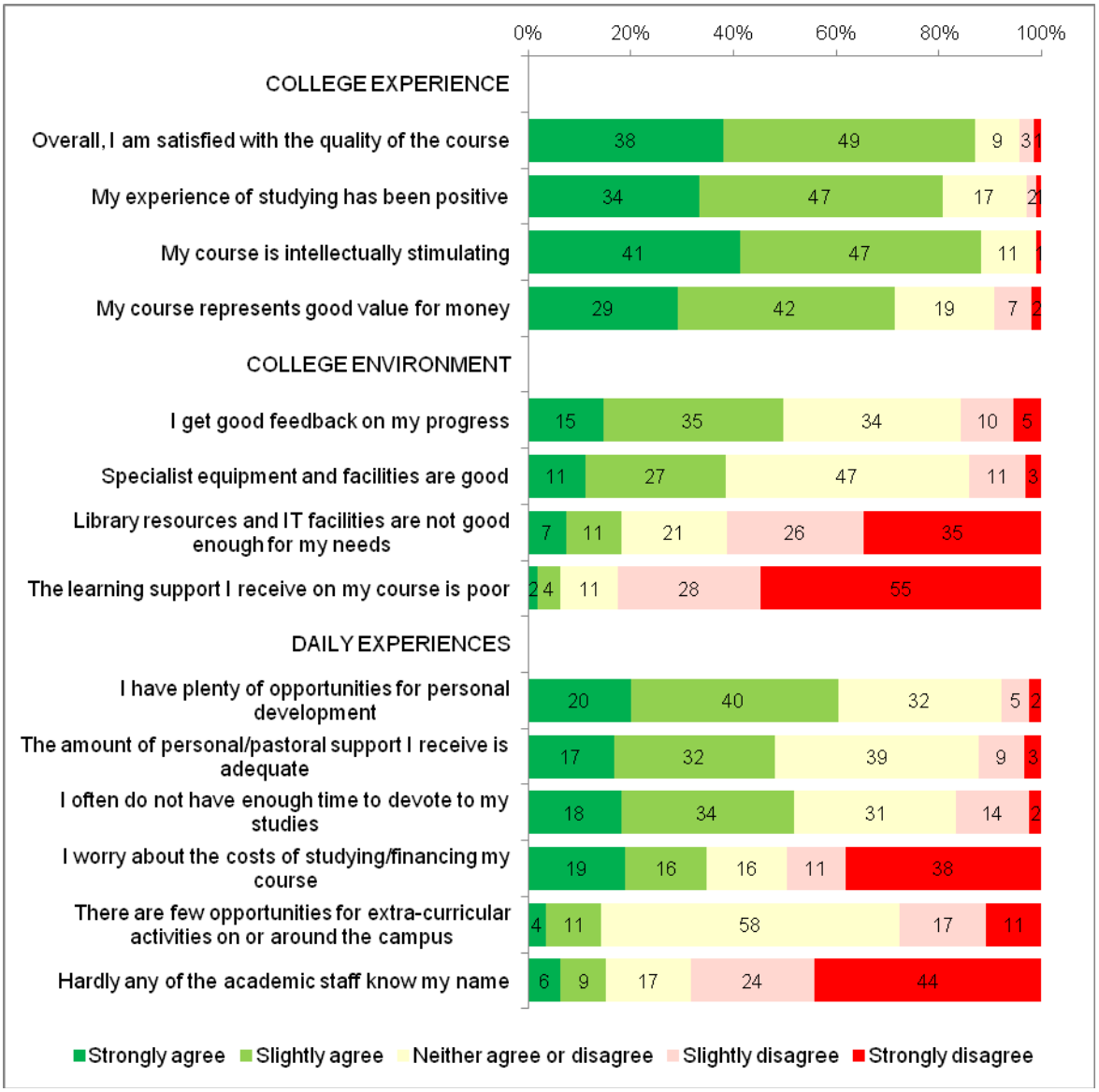
Students' individual daily experiences of being a student varied too. Certainly, the colleges, which usually had small class sizes, provided quite an intimate learning experience with most (68%) students disagreeing with the statement 'hardly any of the academic staff know my name'. However, this appeared to be the expense of a broader higher education student experience - those less tangible aspects of the student experience in a typical higher education institution - with only a minority disagreeing (28%) and agreeing (15%) with the statement 'there are few opportunities for extra-curricular activities on or around the campus', but 60% agreeing that: 'I have plenty of opportunities for personal development' and seven per cent disagreeing.

As we have seen (Table 10.1), the majority of students studied part-time, were 25 and over, had full-time jobs, were married, and had children, unlike full-timers. They had to juggle these work and domestic commitments around their studies. Consequently, most (52%) agreed with the statement: 'I often do not have enough time to devote to my studies' while 16% disagreed.

To what extent were the case study colleges able to help out these predominately part-time students, given their competing pressures and additional responsibilities outside of their studies? Only half agreed with the statement 'I get good feedback on my progress' while 15% disagreed, and a similar proportion (49%) agreed with the statement 'the amount of personal/pastoral support I receive is adequate' while just 12% disagreed.

However, the vast majority disagreed (83%) with the statement 'the learning support I receive on my course is poor.'

Figure 10.7 Students overall college experience, college environment and daily experiences



Base: All students (N varies by question from 195 to 207)

10.4.4 Student identity and contact with their validating university

Students were asked 'if you met a stranger at a party, how would you describe yourself'. They most frequently (80%) responded that they would describe themselves by their occupation, by the paid work they did. A further 10% reported that they would describe themselves as a parent. Just 8% identified with being called a 'college student' and one student a 'university/uni student'. Again these responses are very different from those taking other undergraduate qualifications, reported in Chapter 5, because these students were primarily full-time employees.

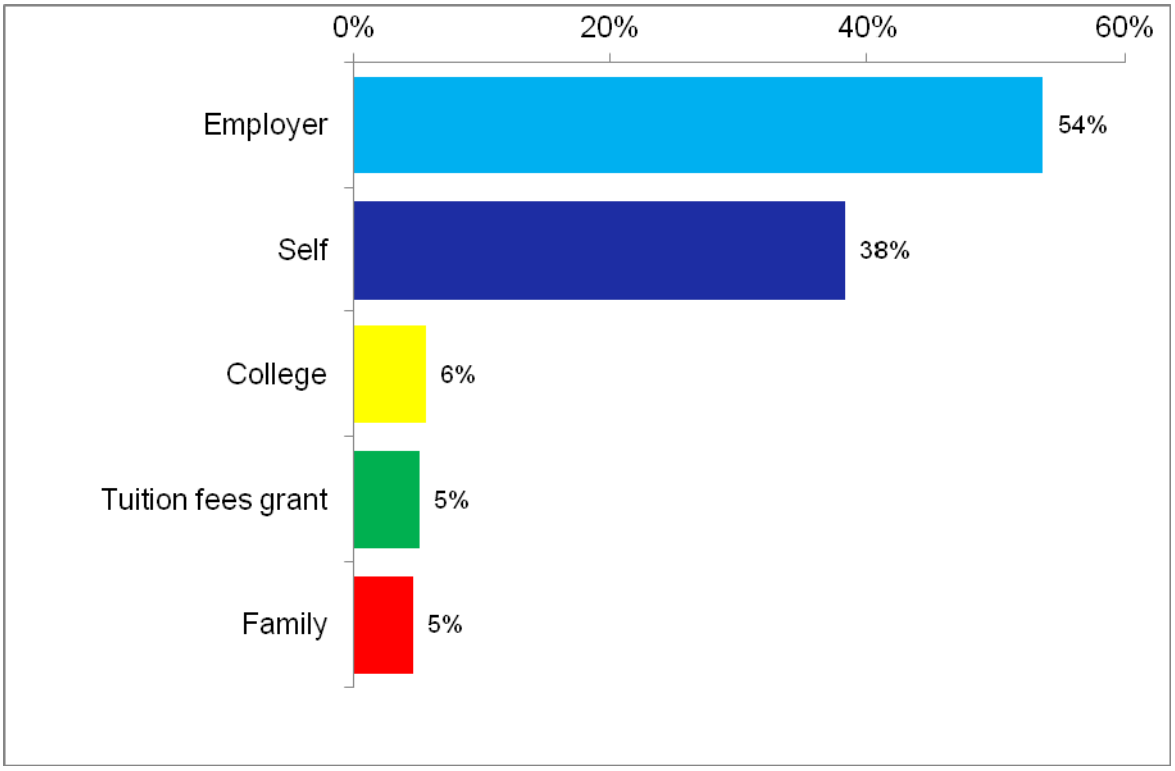
10.5 Costs of studying and concerns about the costs

10.5.1 Tuition fees and how students paid for their fees

Among the students surveyed, the average tuition fee for those studying part-time in 2011/12 was £1,356.

The majority (54%) of students received some help from their employer with their fees with the rest paying for them themselves (Figure 10.8). A third of students worried about these costs of studying and financing their course while nearly a half did not (Figure 10.7) probably because they receive employer support.

Figure 10.8 Source of who paid for tuition fees for part-time students

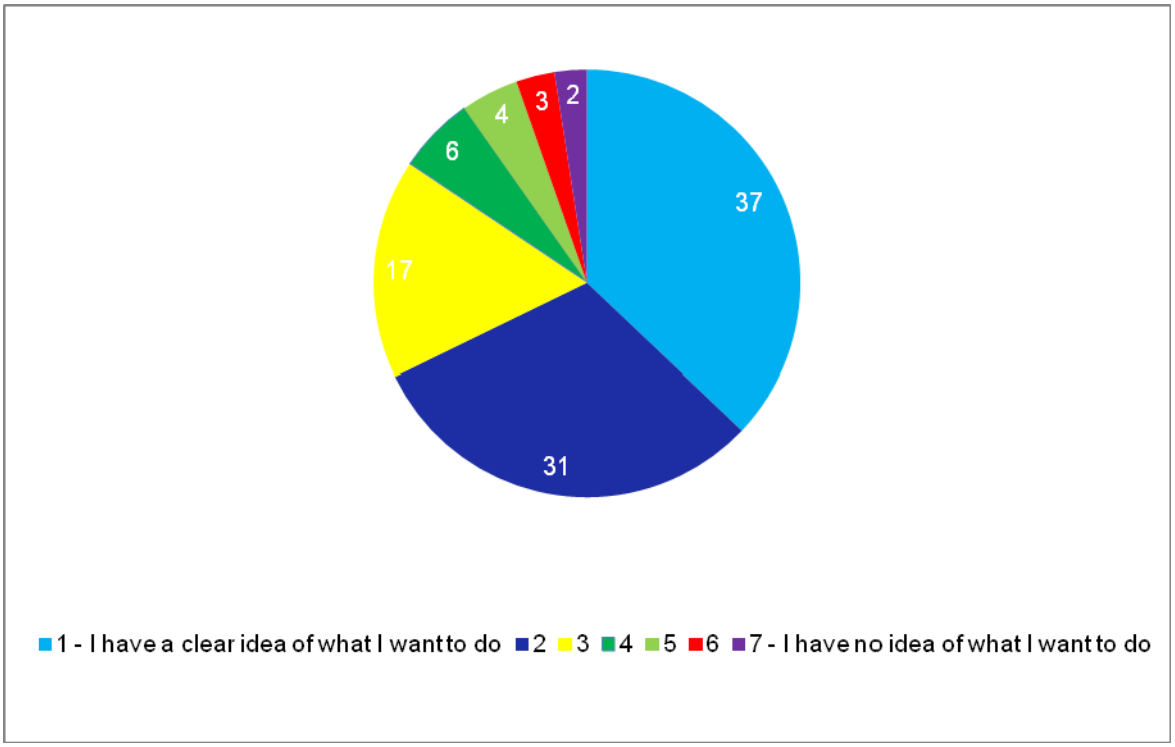


Base: All students (N=196)

10.6 Students' career and future plans

The students surveyed were asked to rate the clarity of their long-term career and future on a scale of 1-7 s where 1 means 'I have a clear idea about what I want to do' and 7 means 'I have no idea what I want to do' (Figure 10.9). Well over two-thirds (1+2) have clear plans which accords with their motivations for study and the vocational orientation of their reasons for choosing their particular course.

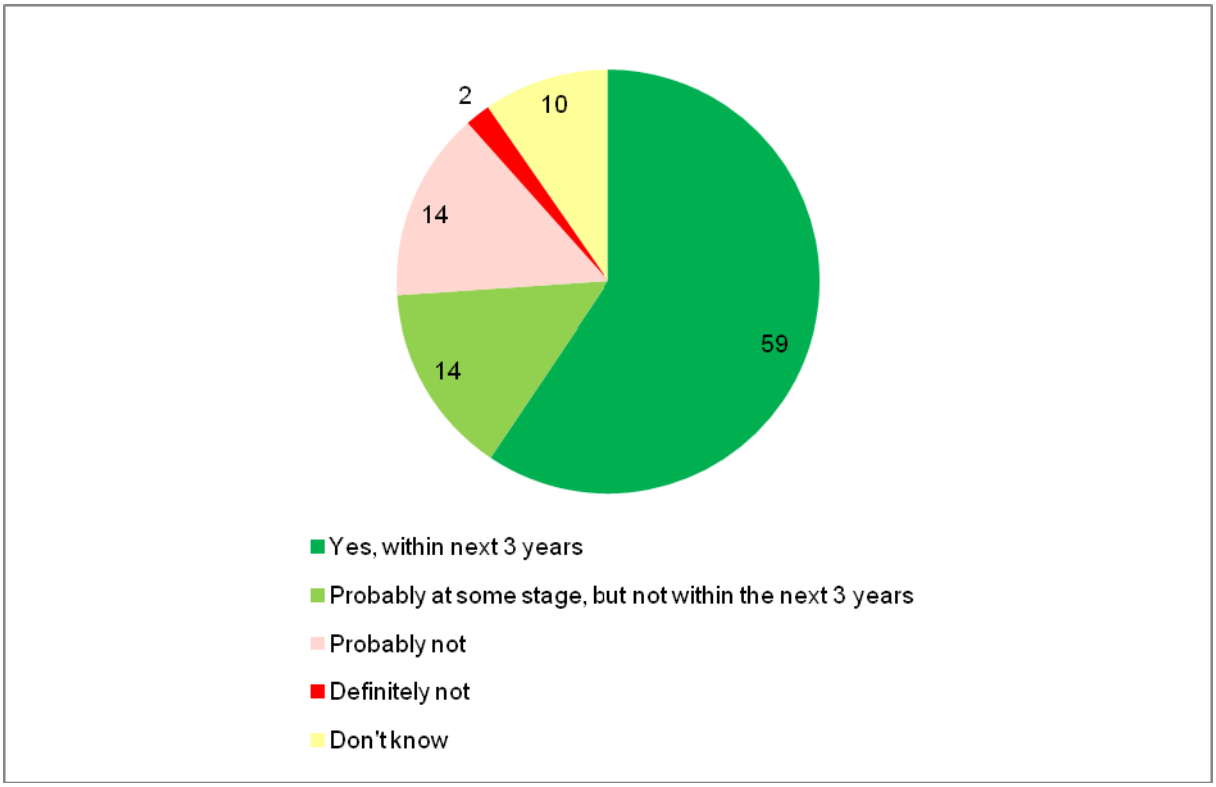
Figure 10.9 Clarity of thought on long-term career and future



Base: All students (N=205)

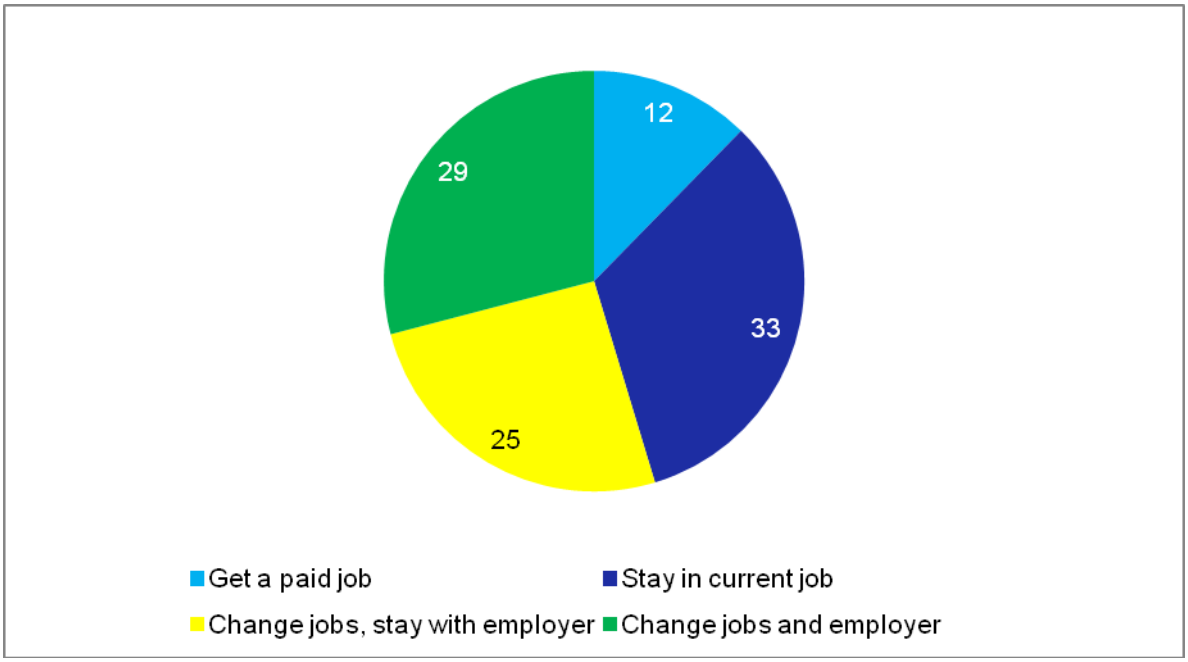
Once students complete their current studies, most (59%) intended to take a further course in the next 1-3 years and a further 14% at some stage (Figure 10.10). In terms of employment, most often they expected to stay in their current job (33%) but 29% wanted to change jobs and employer, and a quarter wanted to change jobs but stay with their employer (25%) (Figure 10.11).

Figure 10.10 Future study intentions



Base: All students (N=207)

Figure 10.11 Plans when finish current course by employment status, qualification aim, mode of study and whether received employer fee support



Base: All students (N=205)

10.7 Summary and conclusions

Student motives for entering higher education were primarily instrumental. Higher education was part of their long-term career plan and a means of improving their opportunities in life. Indeed, the majority of students have very clear career plans. Employment and career related reasons for study, alongside interest in their course and needing to take the particular course to fulfil these ambitions, and especially, the ease and convenience of having already studied at the college, its location near their home or work, and being able to fit their studies around their existing work commitments were paramount for these students. This is perhaps not surprising given that most combined their part-time study with full-time employment. These factors explain why they selected their course and their college.

It is hard to tell if these students were making an informed choice when opting to study at a college rather than a university. Despite the fact that two out of ten respondents had started their course with an undergraduate qualification or higher, and most had had some family exposure to higher education, they seemed to be unsure or unaware of any distinctions between colleges and universities. It is likely that given the students' work and family commitments, and the very large premium they placed on convenience and easy access to the college, that studying elsewhere was not a feasible option. And it was for these reasons that so few applied to study elsewhere.

For most their experiences of study were positive although specialist equipment was not well rated nor the amount of pastoral support. Certainly most had to juggle their studies with their other commitments, and most had to work harder than they anticipated, spending a total of 14 hours per week studying which was equally divided between face to face contact with teaching staff and independent study.

Given that the majority were working full time and studying part-time they did not identify with the label of being a 'university student' but called on their occupational identity unlike college students studying other undergraduate qualifications.

Most were not worried about their costs of studying primarily because their average fees of £1,356 were most frequently paid for by their employer although a sizable minority (38%) paid for their fees themselves.

Most intended to take further courses once they had completed their current course. The majority (54%) intended to change jobs either with their current employer, or another employer, once they had completed their course rather than stay in their current job. So clearly, the course was a means to meet their career ambitions and a springboard to better opportunities.

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